CHEAP · JACK · ZITA

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CHEAP JACK ZITA

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CHEAP JACK ZITA

BY

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'MEHALAH' 'URITH' 'IN THE ROAR OF THE SEA'

'MRS. CURGENVEN' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

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CHEAP JACK ZITA

CHAPTER XXVII

SIR BATES DUDLEY'S RIDE

AFTER a night of revelry, the winter morning broke on men lying tipsy or asleep about the smouldering embers of their fire, against the walls of houses, or crowded on the benches and on the stone floor of the Galilee. Every tavern was packed, and many private houses as well. The rioters had demanded admission, and had threatened violence if opposed. Doors had accordingly been opened to them, and they had received reluctant admission.

On the whole, little serious mischief had been

done. A few shops had been invaded, a few well-to-do persons blackmailed, some windows broken, all the ale and spirits in the public-houses drunk out, and all the hams in the licensed victuallers' consumed; but with the sole exception of the cutting open of the head of the chief constable, no personal violence had been done to any one.

The demonstration had been absolutely resultless, so far as concerned the purpose for which it had been organised. The only fruit that would come of it would be that the bakers, millers, and provision-dealers would raise their prices, so as to recoup themselves for what they had lost, and that certain of the rioters would suffer penalties out of all proportion to the injury done.

Some consciousness that a mistake had been made stole over the dull brains of the men as they awoke, chilled and headachy, on the morning after the entry into Ely. Those men who

had promoted the movement, but had not been suffered to direct it, were certainly alive to the fact that a great blunder had been made, and that their safety was at stake. And when the rumour spread that the dragoons from Bury were about to arrive, the pot-valiant fen-men rapidly dispersed.

Droves and roads radiating from Ely were thronged with fugitives, flying at their utmost speed towards their homes, and none speeding more rapidly than those men who were guardians of the money collected from the farmers and shopmen and millers for the cause, and who sought not only to secure their persons, but also the money they carried with them, for their own advantage. The sum collected might enable them to escape from the neighbourhood, and it would form a comfortable little capital on which to start business where they were unknown.

When, about noon, the military arrived, the streets of Ely were almost as silent and un-

occupied as on any day in the week save market day.

They were met by the magistrates, preceded by Sir Bates Dudley, Bart., an old canon of Ely; the chief constable showed with his head bandaged, and the high sheriff looked approval from his bedroom window, in nightcap and dressing-gown.

Orders were issued for the pursuit of the rioters to Littleport, their headquarters. As it was necessary that a magistrate should accompany them, Sir Bates Dudley was lifted into a saddle. He was a small, very globular man, with a red face and a wig of sandy hair.

'You won't go very fast with me?' inquired the baronet of the officer in charge. 'Be—be—cause, though I was a horseman oo—oo—once, I haven't ridden these forty years.'

Then, turning to his footman, he said, 'Tut—Tut—Thomas, you'll please to run at my s—s—ide, and hold my leg, lest I tut—tut—tumble

off. If you see me getting at all out of the per—per—per—pendicular, just run round and give a pull to the other leg.'

Presently Sir Bates Dudley addressed Drownlands, who was standing near him, holding his own horse.

'You will cuc—come too—so important a witness; and you will indicate who are the persons to be arrested, and who are na—na—named in the warrants I signed. You will oblige me if you will ri—ride at my side, and as Tut—Tut—Thomas is negligent, and his at—at—tention may be distracted, and he may forget his doo—doo—dooty to me, if you see me at all out of the per—per—perpendicular, just give a thrust, will you, with your riding-whip, and set me up—pup—right again. I haven't ridden for forty years. I hope the saddle won't ga—ga—gall the horse.'

'I'll keep at your side, sir,' said Drownlands.

'That wo—wo—won't be quite enough,' said

the baronet. 'If you wouldn't mind keeping an eye on my left leg, and if you see it go—go—going up the side of the saddle, just tut—trot round the ba—ba—back and give me a thrust with the end of your whip, and set me per—per—perpendicular again. I can't trust Tut—Tut—Thomas entirely.'

'I'll do what I can for you, sir,' said Drownlands.

Then Sir Bates turned to his man Thomas and said—

'Ki—ki—keep an even habit of mind, Tut—Thomas, and don't let your thoughts ramble to Mary. Don't pup—pup—pull my right leg too hard, nor let it go too lax.'

Then, addressing Drownlands—

'I am shush—shush—sure the Government and all law-abiding citizens owe a debt of gratitude to you, Mr. Dud—Dud—Drownlands.' The baronet gasped at the name, opening his mouth and jerking his face forward, as though en-

deavouring to catch a bluebottle and swallow it. 'I con—con—congratulate you on your activity, observation, and spirit. You will be the primary means of convicting the ri—ri—rioters.'

The canon rode along, balancing himself uncertainly in his saddle. The dragoons trotted after.

When, however, the clay land of the Isle of Ely was left, trotting was out of the question. The horses made their way painfully through the slough, and military order was not to be maintained.

Sir Bates's horse tossed his head, and endeavoured to keep up a trot. There is pride in brutes as well as in men, and the baronet's steed was elate at the idea of preceding the splendid dragoon chargers, so well groomed, so gorgeously accoutred, and bearing such radiant beings on their backs. Let the fen cart-horses see that he, Sir Bates Dudley's cob, took precedence of, was on gracious terms with, these war chargers.

Every now and then, when a horse was visible in a stubble field, he neighed to him a challenge to observe who went by and in what company.

'I don't quite like this mo—mo—motion,' gasped the canon, who was bouncing like a pea on a drum. 'I am afraid the saddle will terribly ga—ga—gall my horse's back.'

At that moment Drownlands uttered an exclamation, and, turning to the colonel of the dragoons, cried, as he pointed with his whip at a figure in a field separated from the drove by a lane of water—

'There is Ephraim Beamish, a ringleader. A warrant against him is signed. He has the audacity to look on as though this did not concern him.'

The colonel gave orders to two of his soldiers to ride in pursuit. The men detailed for the purpose at once leaped their horses across the dyke. The road bank was sufficiently firm to enable the beasts to spring.

Then they started in pursuit.

'Shoot! Shoot!' cried Drownlands. 'You will never take a prisoner like that.'

The dragoons were careering over the field, one of fifteen to twenty acres, but it was hard work for the horses, so spongy was the soil; and Pip Beamish ran before them without greatly exerting himself.

The dragoons on the drove, at the command of the colonel, drew up in line, and watched the chase.

'They will never catch him,' repeated Drownlands; 'they never can. Give orders that he be shot.'

'I cannot do that,' said the officer in command. 'They will outstrip and head him shortly.'

'They never will. You do not know the Fens.'

In another moment Beamish was seen to plant a long pole he was carrying, swing himself aloft easily and gracefully, and fall lightly on

his feet on the farther side of the dyke limiting the field.

One of the dragoon's horses floundered and rolled over in the soft soil, but the other was close behind Beamish. It rose, and in a moment vanished along with its rider in the dyke. The hind feet had found nothing substantial on which to obtain the necessary purchase for a leap across the water, and the beast and rider had fallen into the stagnant, slimy liquid that filled the ditch.

In spite of discipline, oaths and curses broke from the dragoons who were looking on.

'I knew it,' said Drownlands. 'Why did you not shoot? If that horse hasn't broke his back, it is a lucky job. Now Pip Beamish is beyond reach, beyond gunshot, and it will take a day to get the horse dug out.'

'What do you mean?' asked the colonel angrily.

'Mean? Why, that no horse that falls into a

dyke can get himself out, or be got out save by spade-work. There he must remain; every struggle makes him sink deeper. There is no bottom to the dykes till you reach the clay, and for that you must go down twenty feet. He will never do it again, if that is any consolation to you. But ten to one his back is broke, and you may as well send a bullet through his head.'

'Here,' shouted the colonel, 'dismount and go help Standish out.' He beckoned to three men.

'Help him out?' mocked Drownlands. 'They can't do it. They must have workmen that understand the business. They must have the proper tools. You don't happen to have brought any "beckets" with you, I suppose?'

The man who had been precipitated into the water, was now seen on the bank. He had scrambled out by means of the reeds that grew rankly in the ooze. He was stamping, his splendid accoutrements were tarnished, and the

foul fen-water was streaming from him. Holding the reins, by coaxing words he endeavoured to encourage his horse to struggle out of the water. The poor brute made efforts to escape, churning up the sludgy mud and peat in the dyke, but was incapable of doing anything to extricate himself. The more he struggled the deeper he sank.

When the situation was thoroughly realised—and the colonel would not for some time believe the assertion of Drownlands that the horse could be extricated by no other means than the formation of an incline by spade labour—then he consented grudgingly to negotiate with some loafers who had followed the troop, and by promises of liberal payment to engage them to undertake the rescue of the charger.

When this was settled,—and it took some time to settle,—the body of soldiers advanced towards Littleport. Tidings had come that the rioters were making a rally there, and in-

tended to contest the way with the military. That they were armed was known, as also that the fowlers of the Fens were crack shots. If they held to their resolution, Littleport would not be occupied without effusion of blood.

It was indeed true that a rally had been made at Littleport. The men living there, fearing that they would be arrested for the part they had taken in the disturbance, spoke of defending themselves—better die with guns in their hands, they said, than swing on the scaffold. But now, as before, there was neither discipline nor cohesion among the men. The colonel knew that they had no leaders, and did not greatly concern himself at the menace. He was impatient to reach Littleport, not lest the rioters should gather force, but to get finished with an unpleasant and inglorious affair. Moreover, at Littleport most of the arrests would have to be made, and it was as well to reach it as speedily as possible, before every rioter

had hidden under a bed, or in a rabbit-hole.

In the meantime, a considerable number of persons assembled on the drove, partly to stare at the unprecedented sight of the glittering military parade, but partly also as a means of exhibiting their own peaceful demeanour, and showing that they had no sympathy with the disturbers of tranquillity. As it happened, some of the men who had been instigators to violence thought this a happy way of throwing a veil over their past proceedings. By putting on a look of sheep-like innocence, and thrusting themselves forward, they hoped to escape. But they had miscalculated. They might have escaped, but for the presence of Drownlands, who had followed the mob, watched its proceedings, had taken note of everything done, and of the doers, and had denounced some forty men to the magistrates, and was now accompanying the military and Sir Bates Dudley, to point

out those of whom it was advisable to make an example, and who were already down on his 'information,' and against whom warrants had been issued.

'I think,' said Sir Bates, 'that if I am not absolutely nec—cess—cessary, I would rather return to Ely. The saddle somehow does not fit the horse.'

'We must have a magistrate with us,' said the officer in command of the dragoons.

The canon looked piteously about him, drew out a silk pocket-handkerchief, and wiped his brow.

'It is of the horse I am thinking. A gall is so painful, so very pup—pup—painful to the horse. I will do my dud—dud—duty, however painful it may be to the horse.'

The soldiery trotted on to Littleport. There the rioters had overthrown a waggon across the road, and by means of bundles of straw had composed a rude barricade. The resistance

offered by them was feeble and half-hearted, The sight of the dragoons overawed the men. and several, after firing from behind the bundles, slunk away.

The soldiers speedily passed the barricade and dashed among the men who remained. A shot from behind a garden paling broke a dragoon's arm, another brought down one of the chargers. This encouraged the men for a moment, and they sprang at the heads of the horses, whilst others assailed the riders with pitchforks. There ensued a brief hand-to-hand scuffle. But when one of the rioters was shot through the head, and the men saw that the soldiers were determined no longer to trifle with them, they fled in all directions.

Numerous arrests were made, and then the dragoons returned towards Ely, Sir Bates jogging before them, and their captives well guarded in their midst.

CHAPTER XXVIII

TWO PLEADERS

THE tidings that the dragoons were on their way to Littleport had hardly spread sufficiently in the forenoon to draw together great quantities of spectators, but after they had gone by it was otherwise. The news flew like wildfire over the Fens, and the inhabitants of the district came in troops and lined the road, so that they might have the satisfaction of seeing the military, and taking account of the number of prisoners they had taken.

The fen-folk are all more or less closely connected by marriage, forming a people to themselves, separate in interests, customs, and

character from those who live on the high grounds. They have been wont for generations to seek their mates among themselves, with the result that a close family connection binds the whole population together. The number of cases in the Fens in which a woman, on marriage, retains her maiden name is quite unequalled elsewhere. Whoever might be taken up by the military was certain to be akin to some of the lookers-on, and therefore the spectacle anticipated on the return of the dragoons was calculated to engage their interest and excite their sympathies.

Among the yeomen there is intermarriage with cousins for the sake of adding acre to acre and barn to barn, but among the labouring population no such inducement prevails. They choose their wives from among their blood relatives, because the idea never crosses their minds to go elsewhere to find mates. They must marry cousins or not marry at all, and

the question resolves itself in one of degrees of consanguinity.

As nearly, if not all, the wealthy landowners are grandsons or great-grandsons of half-wild fen-slodgers, it follows that they are knitted by blood ties to the labourers they employ. This does not necessarily increase good fellowship, nor promote forbearance. The purse-proud yeoman is the harshest master. He draws the line of sympathy at the mark of the class to which he belongs, a class of recent creation. He holds fast to his brother yeoman, and both together grind down their brother labourer.

This condition of affairs was of course more noticeable formerly than at present. Each generation separates the well-to-do a step farther from their poor relations. Our story refers to events and conditions some decades ago.

On account of the tyranny exercised by the masters, little consideration was felt for them by

the men when they broke out in revolt, although allied to them by blood; and the stacks that had been fired were in several instances set in flames by the blood relatives of the owners of the stacks.

As the dragoons trotted along the road towards Ely, exclamations and lamentations broke out as the men they had taken were recognised by those who lined the highway.

'There is Robert Cheesewright! Oh dear! what will the old Robert do without him?'

'Be still. They have not taken Robert. He is going as a witness against Pip Beamish. That's why he is there.'

'Well, they have handcuffed James Cammel anyhow, and he was going to marry my Beulah. If they hang him, Beulah will have to take Aaron Layton instead, that's all.'

'There is Joseph Lavender. He is my wife's son by her first husband. She will take on dreadful, and I shan't have my shirt properly

washed, nor my pasty full baked—that's what it means to me.'

'They have taken Flanders Hopkins and Richard Rutter.'

'Yes; and look you there. That's Isaac Harley, as was in the waggon. I wish I had Isaac's gun, I'd shoot the chap that has charge of him. How ever came Isaac to be taken?'

'Ay; and he is cuffed to Joseph Stibbard.'

'Stibbard broke into the parson's house at Littleport, and took his silver spoons and money.'

'He needed them more than did the parson.'

'Of course he did, and had a right to take them. Joseph Stibbard's sister married my nephew, Philip Easy. I hope he handed on the spoons to her before the soldiers took him.'

Such were the comments passed. Some of those looking on endeavoured to push between the soldiers, and get at their relatives who

were being conveyed to prison, but were repelled by their guards. Comments of another sort were expressed less loudly, though not less frankly.

'There rides Drownlands. He has been along with the dragoons all the day. He has been pointing out whom they are to take; and if there is hanging to be done, i' fecks! it is he who has twisted the rope for their necks, poor fellows.'

'I knew he was out and about all last night.'

'Yes, and has been all this morning with the magistrates. But they haven't taken Pip Beamish yet.'

'I am sure they would be put to it for witnesses, if it were not for Tiger Ki. Which of us would peach? Wouldn't we do the other thing, and swear 'em off?'

'You are right there. I suppose Ki Drownlands knows what he is doing. But I reckon that this will be remembered against him, and he will be paid out for it some day or other.'

'Trust our chaps for that, and the day will not be distant.'

Drownlands observed the sullen looks, the scowls with which he was greeted, and noticed the whispers that passed as he rode by, but treated all with indifference or contempt.

'They do not love me. I scoff at them,' said he to Sir Bates Dudley. 'They have done their worst. We are clearing the Fens of the only lads with any spirit in them to do mischief. Those that remain are arrant cowards.'

Then he turned his horse's head down the drove to Prickwillow. 'I am not needed till to-morrow. Here is my home.'

His eye lighted on Zita, who had come forth to see the soldiers pass with their prisoners. Near her were Mrs. Tunkiss, Sarah, and the farm serving-men.

Zita uttered an exclamation and ran forward, caught Drownlands' horse by the bridle, and exclaimed—

'What is the meaning of this? Why is Mark Runham taken? This is your doing.'

'Why not? He headed the rioters.'

'He did not head them. It is false. You know it is so. Set him at liberty at once.'

'I cannot do that. He has been arrested. He will appear before the magistrates to-morrow.'

'Very well, so will I. I can bear witness as well as you.'

Then Zita darted nimbly between the soldiers, in spite of their protests, which were not roughly enforced, for the quick eyes of the dragoons saw that she was pretty. She made her way to Mark, who was handcuffed.

'Mark,' said she, 'I will help you.'

'You?' he answered. 'You said it was all one to you whether I were hanged or transported. I am innocent, and will be discharged without your help.'

'Back!' ordered the dragoon on the right, and Zita was forced to retreat.

As she did so, she saw Kainie by Drownlands. The girl had seized his bridle, and was gesticulating with vehemence.

'It is your doing,' said Kerenhappuch. 'You hate him. You try to destroy him. You are heaping to yourself wrath against the day of wrath.'

'Let go my bridle,' ordered Drownlands.

'You are my uncle,' insisted the girl, her fair hair blown over her face. With one hand she brushed it back, but did not release her hold on the bridle. 'Although you have not treated me as of like flesh and blood with yourself, yet you cannot undo it; I am your niece, and speak to you I will, now.'

'Let go, I say. I will hold no communication with you.' He struck his spurs into the sides of his horse, which reared. But Kainie would not let go. The plunging of the horse made the curb nip and cut Kainie's hand, and some blood came over it. She changed hands on the bridle.

'Look!' said she. 'You cannot help it. This is Drownlands blood. It is Drownlands blood appeals to you now.'

Then Zita laid her hand on the bridle, on the farther side of the beast.

'We are two girls,' she said, 'and we will stay you, man though you be. Kainie and I are enemies, we do not love each other, but we unite in beseeching you to do justice to one man.'

'Ay,' said the mill-girl. 'Uncle Ki, you are bent on evil, and we will hold you back against plunging farther into the slough.'

'Mark never intended to injure you,' said the Cheap Jack girl. 'He sought to save your property for you. Why should you work for his destruction?'

'You shall withdraw your charge against him before all the world,' said Kainie.

'You shall break the shackles off his hands yourself,' said Zita.

Drownlands dug his spurs wrathfully into

the flanks of the horse, and clenched his teeth and hands. But though the beast was wounded and bounded, his head was held too firmly for him to break away.

'Shall I grip your foot till you scream,' exclaimed Zita, 'as I did on the night when I stayed you before?'

'Will you kill Mark, as you killed his father?' asked Kainie.

Her words were random words. She spoke in the vehemence of her wrath against Drownlands, and anxiety for Runham. She knew nothing definite against her uncle, but she had heard the whispered gossip of the Fens.

'I will have justice on all who have wronged me,' muttered Drownlands.

'Take care!' exclaimed Kainie, raising the disengaged hand, down which ran a trickle of blood. 'Do not think that because some of the poor lads have been taken, because ten out of one hundred are handcuffed, that every heart

that is full of bitterness is beating behind prison walls, and every hand that can be raised against you is fettered. There are ninety pairs for every ten you put in iron cuffs, and they will be clenched in rage and resolve of revenge the day that you send the poor fellows to the gallows.'

'I fear them not,' said Drownlands scornfully.

'You may not fear, but that is because, like Pharaoh, your heart is hardened and your eyes are blinded, and the Lord is driving you to your destruction. I am here to stand between you—I, as your niece—between you and what threatens.'

'What threatens?'

'You are threatened.'

'Who threatens me?'

'Pip Beamish for one.'

'Ha! he will be arrested speedily.'

'No, not speedily. He is not taken yet, and till he is taken you are not safe.'

'I will see that he be not at large for long. Before this week is out he will be in prison.'

'That may be a few days too many for you.'

'I fear not your Pip Beamish; your braggarts do nothing.'

'No, braggarts do nothing; but Pip is no braggart.'

'It is my turn now,' said Zita. 'You, Kainie, have tried and have failed. Leave him to me. I can employ reasons that are stronger than yours. Let go your hold of the horse's head. You have said your say. Now I will say mine. But none must hear us.'

Kainie reluctantly released the bit. Then Zita, still with her hand on the bridle, strode in the direction of Prickwillow, leading the horse, and some of the people congregated on the drove looked after her and the master, and laughed.

'He has found his mistress,' said one man nudging his fellow.

'Ay, and is following her lead like a lamb,' replied the man who had been nudged.

'Who leads to-day will drive to-morrow,' said a third.

'Is he going to marry her?' asked the first.

The man addressed shrugged his shoulders and said, 'No money. Drownlands is not such a fool as that.'

None of this was heard by Zita, who did not relax her hold, nor turn to look at those who were left in the road. The master suffered her to conduct him towards the house without making remonstrance.

CHAPTER XXIX

A DEAL

WHEN Zita was beyond earshot, she looked over her shoulder, and said to Drownlands, 'I call that mean.'

She walked on, then halted, changed her hand on the bridle, and, gazing about, said, 'You could free yourself of him in no other fashion, so you swear his life away. But you have to reckon with me before it comes to that. I will go into court and swear against you. What I shall swear to will be the truth; your oath will bind you to lies.'

'I refuse to strive with you in words,' retorted Drownlands. 'A woman is always victor with such weapons.'

'What? you prefer flails?—those are your weapons,' exclaimed Zita, clenching her fist and holding her arm extended before her. 'I know well why you are set against Mark Runham. You think that he is something in some way to me, and that I am much to him. It is because of this that you pursue him. It is because of me that you twist the rope round his throat. But you are wrong altogether. I will not say that Mark is nothing to me. He was kind to me once; kind when my heart was tender, because my father was just buried. But I am nothing to Mark. He mocks at me. He sneers and laughs at the Cheap Jack girl. He does not love me; and, moreover, he is bound to another.'

'Mark bound to another? Who is that?'

'Nay, it is his affair, and he has not given me leave to tell his secrets. But you may guess.'

Drownlands' face testified his surprise.

'I cannot guess,' he said, after a long pause.

'Well,' said Zita, 'father's word was true, that in such matters men are blind. We girls see—and I ought to see, for Mark has not played me fair. He did let me think he fancied me; but I think so no more. He has made me angry with him, and I am angry with him still. But there is a step beyond which I will not go. If I could punish him I would—but not with the rope or Botany Bay. You know that he came into your house in a friendly mind, and with kind intent. You know that he was not in league with that topsy-turvy general public. I shall hate and despise you, as I thought I could hate and despise no man, if you swear falsely against him.'

'He has stood between us,' said Drownlands.

'He has not done so,' retorted Zita. 'Your own deeds lie between us, not Mark Runham. The events of that night lie between us as a wall of ice reaching up to heaven, that can neither be climbed nor undermined. Listen to

me, master. I hate to be mean; but if you drive me to desperation, if I see no other way to save Mark's life, I will do even that which is mean.'

'What is that? I do not understand.'

'I have no wish to do it. I shall hate myself if I do it. You were good to my poor father, and to me. When all was dark and cold about me, you opened to me your house and fireside. You have harboured me, my horse, and the van. I would not speak a word to mortal man of what I know. They might tear the flesh off my bones with fiery pincers, and my mouth would remain shut. I owe you an infinite debt of gratitude, and I would repay it. But there is one thing I cannot do—I cannot suffer you to send Mark to the gallows. Rather than do that, I will speak, and tell the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, about the two flails.'

Drownlands was silent. His face had

changed to a clay colour, and his lips were tightly drawn on his teeth.

'And if it be any comfort to you to know this,' pursued Zita, as she opened the hand extended before her: 'if you will drop this charge against Mark, retract every word you have said in his disfavour, I will swear to you to have nothing more to do with Mark all your days upon earth. He shall be to me no other than a stranger. I will stop my ears against him if he should try to speak to me flattering words. I will turn my head away if the fancy takes him to look at me with kindly eyes. There, Ki Drownlands, I have made you an offer now. I threw a menace at you just now.'

She had stayed the horse. She stood in the midst of the drove, upright, her foot planted before her, her head raised, one arm lifted to the horse's head, the other extended before her with hand outspread. She had nothing on her head save her chestnut hair flying in the cold

north wind. Her side-turned face was colourless and sallow.

'Come, Ki Drownlands. When I make an offer, I mean it. When I make a threat, I mean that too. Will you take my offer? It is not Cheap Jack Zita who will go back from her word.'

'Be it so, then.'

'It is a deal?'

'Yes—a bargain.'

'Here is my hand,' said Zita, dropping the bridle. 'A deal is a deal.'

CHAPTER XXX

IN COURT

A FEW days were allowed to pass to obtain fresh captures. On a keen, frosty morning, those taken by the constable and the military, to the number of nearly forty persons, were brought before the magistrates for the preliminary examination. It had been resolved that a Special Commission should be appointed to try the prisoners on the capital charges of burglary, arson, robbery, and tumultuous assembling to the disturbance of the peace, and the commission of acts of violence. The object of the magistrates on the present occasion was to sift the cases, and deal at once with those of a light nature, and remand such as were serious.

The magistrates were in force at the court-house, and proceedings had begun before Ki Drownlands arrived in a light gig, with Zita at his side.

On reaching the court, the girl was surprised to see a constable issue from the door, and in loud tones call the name of Ephraim Beamish.

'Well,' said she, 'those magistrates must be a set of innocents if they order Pip to be summoned in the streets of Ely. Do they suppose he would come here to be caught? Pip will put his distance between himself and the magistrates, as he did t'other day when the dragoons were on the drove. He did not stay for them then, and he won't come for the calling now.'

On entering the court Zita looked about her. She was affected with a qualm of nervousness, and her colour was heightened. She had never been in a court of justice before; but when she discovered that the hall was crowded, she held

up her head, breathed freely, and her spirits recovered their elasticity.

'It's my own general public again,' said she; 'I am not afraid any more.'

'Ephraim Beamish makes no answer to his name,' said the clerk of the court.

'We will proceed with the case against Ephraim Beamish,' said the chairman; 'and the Bench hopes that the constables will not be remiss in their duty, nor relax their efforts to obtain possession of his body, and lodge him in prison—that is, should his case be proved.'

The evidence produced did satisfy the Bench that Beamish should be remitted to the hands of the Special Commission.

Then Mark Runham was called, and at once placed in the dock.

Zita looked at him. She could see that he was not altogether confident that his innocence would be acknowledged. He strove to disguise his anxiety, but ineffectually. He was be-

wildered at the charge laid against him, and troubled at finding himself in a novel and unpleasant situation.

The depositions having been read over, Hezekiah Drownlands, of Prickwillow, was ordered to stand in the witness-box, for it was he who had lodged information against Mark.

Zita immediately elbowed her way to the front, and, resting her elbow on the rail that limited the portion of the court accessible to the public, looked steadily into the face of the master. She was resolved to check and correct his statements, so that they should not tell unfavourably against the prisoner. Drownlands noticed her, but refrained from meeting her eye. He gave his evidence with hesitation and confusedly, for he had laid information against Mark Runham, and was now seeking to minimise the charge and weaken the force of his own accusations.

'I was in my office,' said Drownlands, 'on that

same evening, and was talking with—with Zita there,'—he pointed with his thumb towards the girl, but without looking at her,—'when I heard the voices of the rioters.'

'Stay a moment,' said the chairman, interposing. 'Who may this Zita be?'

The chairman was a merry, red-faced man, a gentleman who had been brother to a former Dean, and had obtained from that Dean a lease of a large tract of ecclesiastical property for ninety-nine years at a nominal rent, and who resided and had become wealthy in Ely.

'I refer,' said Drownlands, 'to that young woman. She lives in my house.'

The eyes of the Bench and of the audience were directed towards the girl.

'Oh!' said the chairman. 'Rather young for a housekeeper, eh?'

'She is not my housekeeper.'

'In what capacity, then, may we regard her as residing with you?'

Drownlands hesitated.

'Come, come! Don't be reticent, Mr. Drownlands.'

'I really cannot say.'

'Shall we say she is a sort of — ahem — companion?'

A titter ran through the court.

'I am a lodger,' said Zita. 'I pay my way.'

'Silence!' ordered the chief constable.

'You shall speak in your turn,' said the chairman, 'and no doubt you will be able to give us valuable evidence, but you must not interrupt, you understand.' Then, turning to the witness, and chuckling and becoming purple with his suppressed laughter, the chairman said, 'Very well, Mr. Drownlands, go on. We commend your taste. You were talking with your pretty companion, or lodger.'

A laugh ran through the court, in which all joined save the clerical members of the Bench, who looked grave and shook their heads.

Zita coloured, and looked about her angrily. Mark's face was pale, and his eyes were lowered.

'I was talking with her in my office,' continued Drownlands, 'when the mob entered my stack-yard with torches, and threatened to burn my ricks and break into my house. Mark Runham was with them.'

'Did he threaten you?'

'A great many voices were raised. I could not distinguish one from another. There was a waggon, and Aaron Chevell, Harry Tansley, and Isaac Harley were in it, and Tansley held a gun.'

'Never mind about Tansley now. I see in your deposition that Mark Runham entered your house. Was it so?

'Yes. He came to my door and knocked. Then Zita let him in.'

'But,' interrupted the chairman, 'what you say now, witness, is not in agreement with your

information. You deposed that he had feloniously entered your house.'

'He came to ask for money.'

'Yes, that may be; but if he knocked and was admitted, he cannot be said to have feloniously entered your premises.'

'I don't know about that. I gave no orders that he should be let in. She took it on herself, and went down and unbarred the door, and brought him up to the office. When there he asked for money—for twenty pounds.'

'No, gentlemen,' exclaimed Zita, 'it was not so. He told the master that he advised him to pay the money lest the men should do mischief. He asked for nothing.'

'Silence, if you please,' said the chairman; 'your turn will come presently, and then we will listen to your story. Proceed, Mr. Drownlands. You say now that Mark Runham, the accused, was let into your house by the pretty companion

—or lodger. He did not break in. The information is incorrect.'

'I don't understand lawyers' jargon,' said Drownlands sullenly. 'All I know is that Mark Runham came in and asked for twenty pounds, and said that if I did not pay it, the men would burn my ricks as they had those of Gaultrip I know that blows were struck at my door, and I heard threats that the men would break in, and a brick was thrown at me through the window.'

'That took place whilst Mark was in the room said Zita.

'Silence there!' shouted the constable.

'If that girl will intervene, and will not be quiet, let her be put out of the court,' said Sir Bates Dudley, who was on the bench.

'I'll be quiet,' said Zita; 'but when one hears lies, it is hard not to contradict—it is hard—tremenjous.'

'Go on, Mr. Drownlands,' said the chairman.

'They threatened, if I would not pay the twenty pounds, that they would burst in at the door, or by the windows, and take two hundred.'

'Who? The accused?'

'No, not the accused; the others. He was in my office, speaking with me.'

'But we do not want to hear what the others said—at least not now. We are considering the case of Mark Runham. He is a farmer—a landowner, I believe?'

'Yes, he is.'

'And you think it likely that such an one would put himself at the head of a lawless rabble, to wreck farms and extort money from his fellow-landowners?'

'He demanded twenty pounds of me.'

'Well, go on with your story. You refused the money?'

'I did so at first, but in the end I was forced to pay it.'

'Forced? Did the prisoner employ violence?'

'No; the rabble outside threatened to burn all down unless I paid. I put the money into the prisoner's hand.'

'After that he left your house?'

'He took ten pounds also from Zita.'

'No; I offered them to him to save my van!' exclaimed the girl.

'Another word of interruption, and you are turned out of court,' said the chairman. 'Constable, stand by her, and if she opens her mouth again, clap your hand over it, or stuff your pocket-handkerchief down her throat.'

'I will do so, your worship.'

'That is all you have to say, witness?'

'Yes. I have nothing more, except that Runham gave cake and ale to the rioters.'

'You saw him do so?'

'No. I heard he had regaled them.'

'That is no evidence.' Then the chairman turned to Mark Runham and said, 'Has the

accused any questions he would like to put to witness?'

'Yes,' said Mark. 'I inquire of him whether I did not protest that I came merely as a neighbour and a friend.'

'A friend?' exclaimed Drownlands. 'No Runham can be a friend to me, nor I a friend to him.'

'That is no answer to his question,' said the chairman.

'He said something of the sort,' Drownlands admitted.

'Did I not say,' pursued Mark, 'that Gaultrip had refused at the outset to pay blackmail, and that in the end, when his rick was blazing, he gave way, and that I had run on ahead to advise you as a neighbour not to provoke to outrage an irritated and unreasonable rabble?'

'Yes, you said that; but how was I to know you were not acting for the rioters? You gave them cake.'

'Come,' said the magistrate occupying the chair, 'we will hear now what that lively young woman has to say. She clearly is bursting with desire to tell us all she knows. Put her in the witness-box.'

As Drownlands left the place he had occupied, Zita stepped into his room at the instigation of the constable. She looked up at the Bench with a cheery countenance, and then round at the public that crammed every available space.

'Your name?'

'Zita.'

'Yes, that is well enough as far as it goes, but we want your surname also.'

'Father said we were Greenways. But nobody never called him nothing but "Cheap Jack."'

'And your profession or calling? A companion?'

The court tittered. A clown in the public portion of the hall guffawed.

Zita raised herself erect and said, 'A Cheap Jack.'

'A Cheap Jill, I should say,' observed the red-faced chairman, laughing at his own feeble joke, whereupon the Bench smiled, the clerk of the court and the constables laughed, and the public roared.

The magistrate went on, 'If you are a Cheap Jack or Jill, how come you to be at Mr. Drownlands' house? Is your father with you?'

'My father is dead,' replied Zita. 'That is just why I am at Prickwillow.'

'Then I presume you are a roving Jill in quest of a Jack?'

'It is the place of the Jacks to run after the Jills,' said Zita; 'not that I want one, thank you.'

'Hush! hush! No impertinence to the Bench.'

'Beg pardon, I thought the impertinence came from the Bench to me.'

The sally produced some merriment. When

it was subdued, the magistrate in the chair assumed a grave manner, and inquired in a different tone—

'So you are staying at Mr. Drownlands' house? In what capacity?'

'I am a Cheap Jack,' said Zita. 'I have my van there, and horse, and all my goods. We got stuck in the mud of the droves, when on our way to Littleport, the night of Tawdry Fair. Father was took ill and died. So I am lodging at Prickwillow, and I pay for my lodging in blacking-brushes and slop-pails.'

'You are not, then, in any menial capacity—not receiving wages?'

'I am a Cheap Jack, laid by the heels through mud and frost,' answered Zita. 'It is true I have sewn on some buttons for Master Drownlands, and have hemmed the linen, and he gives me house-room for my van and me and the horse, till the dry weather comes and we can move away.'

'Well, enough of that. Tell us what you know about the events of the sixteenth.'

'First of aw—aw—all,' interposed Sir Bates Dudley, who sat on the right of the chairman. 'She has been put on her oath. Had we not bet—tet—tet—er ascertain if she is aware of the nature of an oath?'

'Ah, to be sure! I suppose you were brought up as a Cheap Jack?'

'Always—since I was a baby.'

'And not in the most virtuous and godly manner, I fear?'

'I beg pardon, sir?'

Here the constable interposed. He stooped and said in Zita's ear, 'Address the Bench as "your worships."'

'I beg pardon, your worships. My father brought me up. There was not a better man anywhere.'

'Then—do you understand the nature of an oath?'

'Father didn't swear but very little—off an on like—and mostly at Jewel, who was sometimes very provoking. But nothing like the man with the merry-go-round—he swore awful.'

'I do not mean that. Do you comprehend that you have solemnly promised to speak the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, and that you have called Heaven to witness that it is so?'

'Yes,' said Zita, with a sigh; 'but it is hard—tremenjous.'

'What?—hard to speak the truth?'

'Yes, your worship—because of the general public. You never was a Cheap Jack, was you, your worship?'

'No. Oh dear no, never—never!'

'I thought so. I never saw you at any of the fairs, but there was a man who swallowed knives like that gentleman at your side.'

'Never mind about that.'

'I was going to say, sir, that as you never was a Cheap Jack, you can't understand what the feelings of one is, when she sees the general public afore her eyes. There comes a sort of swelling of the heart, and a desire of the mind to launch out into wonderful tales, and a longing to make the General Jackass believe that black is white, and chalk is cheese, that what is broken is sound, and what is old is new. But I will do my best. I'll shut my eyes and try to forget the general public, and fancy I'm with father in the van, for then I always said straight out what was true.'

The winter sun streamed in at the south window over against Zita and flooded her as she stood in the witness-box. She had a scarlet and yellow flowered kerchief round her neck and over her shoulders, the white chip bonnet with black ribbons hardly contained her luxuriant, shining hair. The sun blazed in her face, flushing her ripe cheeks, making very June

cherries of her lips, and adding a solar twinkle to the sparkle of intelligence and wit indwelling in her honest but roguish eyes. She stood as upright as a wand, her hands resting on the rail before her, and her head thrown back.

The chairman bent to Sir Bates Dudley and whispered—

'What a good-looking wench it is!'

'Is she, indeed?' said the canon. 'You don't mean to say so.'

It did not comport with ecclesiastical, certainly not with canonical, decorum and dignity to know whether a girl were good-looking or not.

The chairman turned to the magistrate on his left and made the same remark. This magistrate was a layman, a retired admiral, who had come to live in Ely because his daughter was married to an official there. His name was Abbott. There was no etiquette in Her Majesty's Navy against observing good looks. He replied, Thunderingly so, Christian.'

Christian was the chairman's name.

'I'll speak the truth,' said Zita; 'though it is against nature—just as it was against nature for that little fat gentleman to ride yesterday; but he did it, because he ought.'

A roar of laughter at the expense of Sir Bates Dudley.

'Go on,' said the chairman, hardly controlling himself—the lay members of the Bench loved to have a joke at the expense of the clerical members. 'Tell your story, and tell it truthfully, or you'll get yourself into difficulties.'

'I mean to,' said Zita.

Then she gave the narrative of the events of the evening of the riot in their order, with such lucidity and simplicity, and so frankly, that the truth of her story was stamped on every sentence. Now and then some odd remark, some allusion to her van or goods, or to the horse, provoked a laugh, and she kept Bench and public in good humour.

'I really think,' said Mr. Christian, 'that we may dismiss the case against young Runham. If my brother magistrates agree with me'— He looked round and met with nods of approval. 'The charge against Mark Runham seems to be a mistake. There is actually nothing in it, and the Bench sincerely regrets that, through a misunderstanding, and possibly through an excess of zeal on the part of Mr. Drownlands, you, Mark Runham, should have been placed in the position you have. Constable, discharge him.'

'Thank you, gents,' said Zita. 'You've done right, and I'm glad of it. As I came here, I heard that you had given orders for Pip to be called. I did think you then a set of ninnies—but now'—

'That will do. You can leave the witness-box.'

'No, sir—your worship, not yet. I have not quite said all I want to say. I am very much

obliged that you have listened to reason and have let Mark go. And, your worships, there are six of you on the bench. I have got just six toasting-forks in stock — the beautifullest toasting-forks that ever you saw. They have red japanned handles and brass mounts, and fold up small, like telescopes, into the handle. And if your worships will do me the favour of coming to Prickwillow, I'll furnish every one of you with a toasting-fork.'

'That will do; leave the witness-box.'

'And, your worships, if you will pass over poor Pip Beamish,—he's not right in his head, —I'll let you have a real epergne to raffle for between you.'

'Constable, remove that girl. Turn her out of the court,' ordered the chairman, red with laughter.

'I pity the man she chooses as her husband,' said Christian behind his hand to Abbott, when his order was being carried out.

'Or Drownlands, whose companion she is,' whispered the admiral.

'No — hang it!' said Mr. Christian. 'No more of that. I am sure that girl is as straight as a whistle. You cannot look in her honest face and hear her cheery voice and not swear she is as good and clean as gold. 'Pon my life, Abbott, I have a mind to go for my toasting-fork. What say you? You are an old acquaintance, as you heard,—swallowed knives at the fair,—will you go?'

CHAPTER XXXI

PISGAH

ZITA was standing in the room Drownlands called his office, in conversation with the master.

'What did you mean by that which you said to the magistrates—that you were tied here by frost, held by mud, and that when frost went and mud dried you would be free to go?'

'It is so.'

'You will leave me?'

'I would go as soon as the van could roll along the drove,' replied Zita, 'but that there are other difficulties than frost and mud, and how to get out of these I do not as yet see. I work at them in my head, but cannot find a way

of escape.' She considered a while, with her hands folded and her eyes on the floor. 'You see, there is the stock. It seems sinful to let it lie idle—if it don't breed money, it will breed moths and rust. Father always said money was made to jump—just the same as frogs were so created. Here is all this store of goods doing nothing. Here is myself—born a Cheap Jack, and a Cheap Jack to my fingers' ends. I am not in my right place if not going about in my van to fairs and markets, selling my goods, and making the money jump, as it was ordained to.' Zita pursed her lips. 'That is on one side. On the other there are considerations also. In the first place, it is awkward for a young girl to be cheap-jacking over the country—it's awkward, and it's not respectable. She cannot manage by herself. As the gentleman said, a Jill must have a Jack. That was true, though I did not like to hear him say it. I could not manage the van and Jewel and the selling alone. I

must have some man with me. And if I were to take a servant, he might set his head to make himself Jack and make me Jill. And to take a proper Jack,' pursued Zita,—'I mean, to have a husband,—why, I don't fancy it. I don't like the notion of it at all. There is my great difficulty.'

'Then stay at Prickwillow.'

'I don't know. If I were here, you would not leave me in peace and quietness. I do not desire to remain here, but I do not know where else to go. Now, you see, I am in a cleft stick.'

'Take me, and remain.'

'That, I have told you, can never be. If you ask that again, I will go. If you say nought about it, I will make shift to stay till something turns up.'

'Till you find a Jack?'

'I do not want a Jack. I said so. I want to remain free—Jack and Jill all in one.' Her

expression suddenly changed as she asked, 'Have they taken Pip Beamish yet?'

'No; he has been seen, but he eluded capture. He is in the Fens. He has some hiding-place, but where it is we have not yet discovered. The constables are out and watching. He cannot leave the Fens.'

'Cannot? He escaped the dragoons. He has escaped the constables, as you tell me now.'

'Ah! the dragoons were not accustomed to fen ways. The constables will take him. They will form a ring and close in. There is a reward for whoever takes him, and I have added five guineas.'

'And I will give ten to any constable who lets him slip through his fingers. Publish that.'

'We have had enough of Ephraim Beamish,' said the master. 'We were speaking about ourselves. You have your difficulties and troubles, but I also have mine.'

Drownlands seated himself at the table, placed his arms on the board, and for a moment rested his head on his folded arms. Then he looked up and said—

'I have my distresses, but they are of other nature to yours, and different in degree. Do you know Scripture? Did your father ever read the Bible to you?'

'My father was a God-fearing man,' answered Zita, with warmth and pride. 'He made me learn passages by heart, and there was one tale he read over every Sunday, and never tired of it. It was how the Israelites borrowed of the Egyptians jewels of silver and gold, and spoiled the Egyptians, then went off and got the Egyptians drowned, and so were able to keep their borrowings. Father said there was the making of Cheap Jacks in them Israelites.'

'Did you ever read of Moses, how he went up the mountain to view the Promised Land,—the land flowing with milk and honey,—and he

looked on it from afar, but was never allowed to set foot thereon? And he died there, in the mount. The wind came to him sweet with thyme, and he saw the green cattle pastures by the waters of comfort, but he might not drink of its milk or eat its honey. And he died there, looking at the land that was so near and yet so far, a land he might see, but never set foot on. He died there, for it broke his heart.'

Drownlands laid his head again on his folded arms. Zita remained in the same position. She had an inkling of his drift, and was uneasy, and cast about for some means of relief from a painful scene.

'I suppose,' she said, 'there were fine bargains to be driven in the Promised Land, and that the Canaanites were as soft-headed as the Egyptians. To a man of proper feeling it was vexing.'

Drownlands paid no attention to the remark. He continued—

'Do you remember why Moses was not

suffered to go in and possess the Good Land? There was something betwixt him and it. He had done that which was against the law, therefore the Lord showed him the fields of Canaan, but said he must never lay his head in the dewy grass, never smell its upturned earth, never touch its fair flowers.'

'Yes, I remember something about it,' said Zita.

'What killed Moses was the seeing the land, and being told it never might be his,' continued Drownlands. 'But he could not go back from Pisgah into the wilderness. He could not turn his back on Canaan. He must sit among the rocks, and look on the pleasant land, till his heart broke, and he died.'

The girl fixed her eyes on the quivering face of Drownlands. She saw that he was in terrible earnest, and she did not see her way out of an embarrassing situation. He spoke again.

'Zita, do you think it would have been wise

for Joshua to have come up into Pisgah when Moses was there? Would not Moses have sprung up and cried out, "This man will enter on what is denied me!" and have held him by the throat?' Drownlands was now on his feet, his hands extended before him, suiting his action to his words. 'He would have held him by the throat, have thrown him on a rock, put his knee to his chest, and bent his back so—and have broken his back.'

As he spoke, he hit and split and crushed down half the table. Then he drew a long inhalation, reseated himself, wiped his brow, and said—

'There is no Joshua. You swore to me there was none.'

'I think I can comprehend this roundabout talk,' said Zita. 'But if you mean that I am your Promised Land, you are mistaken. I never was promised to you.'

'No, that is true; you are the Loved Land,

the Desired Land. No, you never were promised.'

'And it is quite certain that I am not for you.'

'I know it.'

'And I will trouble you to keep your Pisgah at a distance, and stick to it,' said Zita.

'You have told me that you never can be mine, and you have told me also why. My sin stands between us, as a sin stood between Moses and Canaan. And yet—I would do it again if I met him. You do not know how Runham wronged me; you have never learned what was my provocation. I pay the penalty of my sin, as did Moses. That very night I killed him — that very same night, not two minutes after the last bubbles came from his lips—I first saw you. The punishment followed on the crime faster than the thunder-clap after the lightning-flash. Well, then, so long as you remain before my eyes, that I can see your

golden hair, and hear your lark-like voice, I am content. I have all I can expect. I will try to be content. But I could not endure to have a Joshua near me.'

'There is none—if you mean a Jack.'

'I trust your word. Mark Runham is nothing to you?'

'I am nothing to Mark,' said Zita, with slight evasion. 'He would not even look at me in court.'

'So long as you remain here, I will bear my burden, though it break my heart, bit by bit. But that is better than to lose you altogether. No'—he stood up again, went to the window, leaned his arm and head against the shattered casement, and let the wind blow in on him through the broken glass—'no, that I can bear —to have you here. But to lose you—to see you no more—I cannot even endure to think of that.'

Zita made a movement to escape. He heard

her, and, without turning his head, made a sign to her with his hand to stay.

'Do not leave me. I have still something I must say. I want to strike a bargain with you.'

'A deal? I am ready.'

Zita resumed her place. Drownlands came slowly back to the table.

'Listen to me,' he said, with a thrill in his deep tones. 'I have made up my mind to this —that *his* blood lies between me and you, as a Dead Sea I may never cross. I must sit on my Pisgah and look at you as unapproachable. That is all I can hope for; that is all I demand; and in order to secure this, I am ready to make you an offer. I shall never marry—never. All the land round Prickwillow is mine, and I have money in the bank—many thousands of pounds. You know what money is worth. You can judge what this land brings in every year to heap the pile. It shall all be yours if

you will stay with me till I die. I ask for nothing else but to have you here in this house, that I may hear you laugh, that I may see your smiling face. That is all. I will not open my mouth to ask for anything but that—just to see you and hear you every day; now and then to touch your hand; happy, if as you pass me your skirts brush me; glad for a day if you condescend to cast a word at me. That is all—the full, the sum of all. And for that I will pay away everything I have. Command me. Do with me what you please, only do not banish me. My money is at your disposal, and when I die everything that I have becomes yours. See here.' He went to his desk, unlocked it, and drew forth a paper. 'I have made my will, but it is not yet signed and attested. It could not be so till we had come to an arrangement together. If you will undertake to remain with me on the terms I propose, then you will be a wealthy woman some day when I am gone.

And whilst I am here cumbering the place,'—his tone was bitter,—'you have but to ask and I will give you what you require. Agree with me, and this document shall be signed and attested forthwith. For a very slight concession on your part you will receive a rich repayment. As you said, you could not go about the country in your van, and you have no settled home to which you can go. Surely you will concede this to me.'

He placed the paper on the table before Zita.

She took up the will and read it through.

In few words, and to the point, Drownlands had constituted her sole heir and legatee to everything he possessed, on the one condition that she remained in his house through the rest of his life.

She put the paper down on the table again, without, however, releasing it from her hand, and stood considering.

'There is one thing,' she said, after a long

pause, 'one thing I must stick out for whether I stay here for a short time or for long.'

'What is that?'

'That you board up the shed where my van is kept, so that the fowls may not roost on it.'

Then in at the door came Mrs. Tunkiss.

'There's Mark Runham come,' she said to the master, after looking suspiciously first at Zita, then at him. 'And he says he must speak with you on business.'

'Mark?—Mark again? Bring him here. I am not afraid of him now. Come, Zita, what say you to my offer?'

For a few moments she remained with her hand to her head, breathing hard, her eyes dim.

'Come, Zita—what answer?'

She looked at him with glazed eyes. She was in pain and sorrow. She would in one moment see Mark,—Mark, whom she loved,—and see him with the knowledge that she never

could be his. But the demand made of her to surrender was not so great as it might have been had Mark loved and respected her. He liked, or had once liked her. Now he loved another. He despised her for some reason she could not understand. He held by Kainie, to whom he was bound by promise, and to whom, after a short wavering of his affections, he had returned.

'Come, Zita, what say you to my offer?'

In a whisper, with sunk head, her chin in her bosom, and with folded hands—

'I accept.'

CHAPTER XXXII

A PARTHIAN SHOT

'SHALL I go?' asked Zita.

'No, stay. There can nothing pass betwixt us but what you may hear. And now that he is come, he shall witness the signature to the will.'

'I would rather leave.'

Further discussion of this point was prevented by the entrance of Mark.

The young man noticed that Zita was in the room, but he did not look at her or address her. He directed his eyes steadily at Drownlands, who remained seated at the table.

'I have come on business,' said Mark.

'Say what it is.'

Mark demurred. 'Let us speak together in private.'

'No; what has to be said may be said before her.'

'If you wish it. I have come concerning Kainie.'

'What about Kainie?'

'She is your niece.'

'To my sorrow.'

'You should not say that. She is a good girl. Not to your sorrow, but to your shame.'

Drownlands stamped.

'Spare me words. My patience will not stretch far.'

'Kainie is your sister's only child. She is your nearest relative. I have come to you in her interest. It is no longer possible for her to remain at Red Wings.'

'Why not?'

'It is not seemly. It is not just. The Fens are in commotion; wild men are about, lawless

deeds are being done. She is but a girl, and is unprotected, and away from help, if she needed it.'

'She has her dog.'

'That is not sufficient. Dogs have been silenced before now. Consider to what dangers a girl is exposed in such a solitary spot.'

'Pshaw! the men are cowed.'

'Several are about in hiding, and are not yet captured. You do a great wrong to Kainie.'

'I do her no wrong. I leave her alone.'

'That in itself is a grievous wrong. Whose duty is it to guard her, but yours? She bears your name.'

'To my disgrace!' exclaimed Drownlands, glaring up with wrath. 'No more of that.'

'Well, it is no pleasant topic.'

'Did Kainie send you to me?'

'No; I came because I felt concerned for her, and convinced that she must not be allowed—no, not for another night—to remain under the

sails of Red Wings. Will you receive her at Prickwillow?'

'Not I.'

'She must be removed from the mill. If you will not take charge of her, then I must.'

'You are welcome. I will have nothing to do with her.'

'Well, then, so be it. It is your duty to see to her security. You refuse to do your duty, so I shall take her. That is settled. Now, one thing further. Will you make Kainie an allowance, —something to support her,—even if you refuse her shelter?'

'Not a penny. I washed my hands of her mother, and I wash my hands of her.'

'I feared this would be your answer,' said Mark, and drew a long breath. 'I feared my application to you would be in vain. Nevertheless, I considered myself bound to make it; I could not act till you had refused to act; much as did Boaz when troubled concerning Ruth.

You finally refuse to give protection to Kainie in her loneliness, and at this season of danger?'

'Ay, I do.'

'And refuse to furnish her with even a pittance out of your abundance?'

'Ay, I do.'

'You should blush to deny her what she needs.'

'I blush for her being in the world at all.'

Mark turned to go. Then Drownlands spoke out in strong tones—

'Stay! Now that you are here, I ask you to do me a favour. It is not much—merely to witness a document, to attest my signature to my will. I desire you to see me sign that, and it will be the best answer I can make to your application on behalf of Kainie. Zita, call up Leehanna Tunkiss.'

Mrs. Tunkiss was behind the door. She had been listening in the passage, and now appeared in the doorway, after a short scuffle of feet, to

give a semblance of her having come from a distance.

'Do you want me, master?' she asked. 'I was in the midst of baking.'

'Stand there,' ordered Drownlands. Then, rising to his feet, he held up the will and said, 'I have been making my last testament, and I desire that you, Mark Runham, and you, Leehanna Tunkiss, should see me sign it. But that will not suffice. I wish you to know its contents, and then there can be no question relative to its genuineness; and, above all, no delusions, no hopes, no schemes can be based on relationship, fancied or real, that are doomed to disappointment.'

Drownlands looked round him. He saw a flicker in Leehanna's eye. She was akin to him distantly, yet really.

'Zita and I have come to an understanding together,' said the yeoman, in articulate words spoken slowly. 'Zita has promised that she

will remain with me, and will look after my house, rule over my servants, attend to my comforts as long as I live. If you, Leehanna, choose to remain with this understanding'—

'I shall do no such thing,' said the housekeeper, tossing her head. 'I thought matters would come to this very quickly. I knew what the minx was aiming at.'

'That is your affair,' said the master. 'Zita stays here, and her word is to be law in my house. I have made my will, and leave to her everything I possess—every brick of my house, every clod of my soil, every guinea of my hoard. He paused, and looked from one to another. Mark and Leehanna remained mute with astonishment. 'Now go, Mark Runham, as soon as you have attested my signature, and tell Kainie she has nothing to expect from me at present, nor in times to come—nothing from Drownlands living, or Drownlands dead. Let this be known throughout the Fens. Mark Runham,

stand here and witness me sign my name. This is my true act and deed.'

'I will not do this,' said the young man, turning white. 'Get some one else to see this done—this that stamps her infamy and your baseness.' He turned sharply about and went through the door. Then he halted for a moment, hesitated, holding the jamb with one hand, and, looking back with a face devoid of colour, said, 'To-night I shall fetch Kainie away, and she shall find her home with me.'

'Mark!' exclaimed Zita, running to him.

'Stand back!' said he roughly. 'Do not come near me; you, who sell yourself body and soul for what you call profits.'

Then he turned and staggered down the stairs.

'And I give notice that I leave this house at once,' said Mrs. Tunkiss. 'Fine goings on these be. I have ever kept myself respectable. I've been the only respectable woman here besides Sarah. I'm not going to stay in this

house, which will be avoided by every decent woman, with a man that will be pointed at by every decent man, with her in it as missus—as missus'—

The woman laughed bitterly, tauntingly, and threw a foul name in the face of Zita, and then backed, with a sneer on her lips and hate in her eyes.

CHAPTER XXXIII

PURGATORY

SUDDENLY, and for the first time, did the thought flare through Zita's brain and scorch it — that she had compromised her character.

Now only did she see why Mark had refused to look at her; now only understand what he meant when he said that she had sold herself body and soul; now only comprehended what the laughter signified when the chairman in court had suggested that she was the 'companion' of Drownlands, a suggestion which had been received with titters. She remembered how then her brow had become hot, her heart had beat fast; she was sensible that something

had been said that hurt her maiden pride, something that lowered her in the esteem of those assembled in the court. But she had not sounded the meaning of the insinuation, and had not thought what was really the sting in the words which wounded her.

Zita possessed a considerable amount of pride —a different sort of pride, maybe, from any that we can conceive in our stations in life. It was not vanity. She concerned herself little about her personal appearance, and made no effort by dress to display her beauty. She knew she was a good-looking girl, and was indifferent to the fact. She had no education of the sort which we prize; but she had stood on platforms, her feet level with the shoulders of the general public, and she had come, instinctively, without being able to account to herself for it, to regard herself as possessing a character, a dignity of her own above that which belonged to the members of the general public.

She who stood above it actually must live up to her level, and stand above it in moral strength and integrity.

Zita had a simple and innocent mind. She had been reared in a van, had led a rambling life, her sole associate had been a father—a kindly man, gentle, good after his lights, and very careful of her welfare. The fact of her having been shifted perpetually from place to place had prevented her forming associates, making fast friendships, so that she had really had none to affect her mind save her father, and had grown to womanhood a singular combination of shrewdness and simplicity. Thus her heart was fresh and childlike, whilst her brain was keen in all that concerned commerce. She had been carefully screened by the Cheap Jack father from everything that could taint the sweetness of her innocence and sully the crystalline purity of her mind.

There was one thing she had never learned

from her father, one thing of which till this moment she had no conception—the power of public opinion. She had acquired in her vagrant life an idea that the general public was a something to be laughed at and laughed with, that was to be humoured, cajoled, befooled ; but it had never been suspected by her that the public could utter its voice and make the heart quake, breathe on and blast a reputation, could bite and poison the blood.

Now, suddenly, a veil was lifted, and she saw the general public in a new light, and felt the terrible power over her life and happiness that it exercised.

No man is so free as the man without a home. If he has committed an indiscretion, he pulls up his tent-pegs, moves away, and is forgotten. But a man who remains on the scene of his indiscretion is haunted by it ever after. The remembrance clings to him as the shirt of Nessus. It is never forgotten, never forgiven.

As long as the van crawled over the face of the country, changing the atmosphere that surrounded it, it eluded the force of public opinion. Its inmates paid no tax to it; were not registered on its books. But hardly had Zita become settled before its burden fell upon her.

'Unsay what you have said!' cried Zita, grasping Mrs. Tunkiss by the arm.

'It is true. It is what every one has been saying; and, as you see, Mark Runham won't have anything to do with you. You thought to catch him, did you? You've been angling for him and the master, and taken the one as bids highest. 'Tis like a Cheap Jack that. You're young, but bold as brass and cankered as iron.'

'Silence, you false-mouthed woman!'

'Can you silence all the tongues in the Fen? There's not a man over his pipe and ale in the tavern ain't jeering at you. There's not a

woman over her soapsuds and scrubbing-brush ain't crying shame on you. But what can you expect of a vagabond but vice? I spit at you.'

Zita cast the woman from her, and turned and threw herself on her knees at the broken table, buried her face in her hands, and burst into tears.

Drownlands waved imperiously to the housekeeper to leave, and the woman withdrew, muttering and casting malignant glances at the broken, prostrate girl.

The table was between the master of Prickwillow and Zita. His knuckles rested on the will. He leaned on them, and looked down on the shining head that was laid low before him. Zita's hair was cut short, and her neck showed as well as her rounded cheek.

He did not speak. He breathed heavily through his distended nostrils. He waited, not knowing what direction her thoughts might take, what resolve her mind would form.

There were but few alternatives among which she might choose. She could not resume her life as Cheap Jack without taking an assistant, and from that course she shrank with maidenly repugnance, rightly estimating its dangers. If she were to throw herself among the wanderers who frequented fairs, it would be to court ruin. Was it not probable that she would maintain her resolution to remain at Prickwillow, with this difference, that she would accept his first offer, and become his wife, to save her fair name from reproach? So far as Drownlands could see, this was the only means whereby she could extricate herself from her difficulties, and his heart swelled within him at the hope that opened before him. But he saw clearly that he must allow her to work to this solution by herself unassisted. A word from him would mar everything.

He accordingly stood with bent brows and pale face, the furrows deeply graven on his forehead and seaming his cheek, his lips set,

looking steadily at the chestnut-gold head and the delicate bowed neck.

There is no agony more terrible than the agony of the soul, and among the many anguishes with which that can be affected none equals in intensity and poignancy that which is caused by the sense of the loss of the respect of men.

There was an ineffable humiliation in the thought of the light in which she—Zita—had come to be regarded, if what Mrs. Tunkiss said was true. The girl who errs through over-trust in a lover, who has believed his word, his oath, is looked down on, but deserves some pity. But Zita did not occupy such a position, had not the same claim to be dealt by lightly. She had—so men thought, so men said—deliberately and calculatingly sold herself to Drownlands. Her degradation had been a piece of sordid merchandise, with haggling over terms.

That was true which Leehanna said. She was the subject-matter of talk in the taverns, of

coarse and ribald jokes, of calculation of the chances she had of retaining the affections of Drownlands, of remark on her craft, her dexterity in laying hold of and managing this intractable tyrant of the Fens.

But perhaps the intensest anguish-point lay in the thought that Mark, who had loved her, or liked her—Mark, whom she had loved, whom she loved still, regarded her with disgust, held himself aloof from her, as one unworthy even of his pity, as a cold, calculating wanton.

As all these thoughts passed through the mind of Zita, the pain was so excessive that she could have shrieked, and felt relief in shrieking ; that she worked with her feet on the planks of the floor, as though to bore with them a hole down which she might disappear and hide her shame.

The drops ran off her brow like the drops on a window after rain—long-gathering trickles of moisture, then a great drop, immediately succeeded by another accumulation, and again

another drop. Save for the working of her feet on the floor and the movement of her fingers, she was motionless. Drownlands contemplated her steadily. He saw her, in her anguish of mind, twine and untwine her long fingers, then pluck at and strip off chips of the table where he had broken it, put them between her teeth and bite them, but still with lowered brow and eyes that she could not raise for shame. He could see flushes pass over her, succeeded by deadly pallor. It was as though flames were flickering about her head, shooting up and enveloping throat and cheek and brow, then dying down and leaving a deathly cold behind. A soul in this present life was prematurely suffering its purgatory.

Then she laid her hands flat on the table before her, then folded them, as children fold their hands in prayer, and she was still, as though her pulses had ceased to beat and her lungs to play. Then again ensued a paroxysm of distress,

in which the fingers writhed and became knotted, and tears broke from her eyes and sobs from her heart.

How long would this last?

What resolutions were forming and unforming under that crown of shining locks, in that heavily-charged heart?

The door was thrust open, and in came Sarah, the maid with St. Vitus' dance.

'Please,' she said, 'there be three gem'men from Ely downstairs. They say they be come after their toastin'-forks.'

CHAPTER XXXIV

WITH TOASTING-FORKS

ZITA rose from her knees.

'Tell them to wait, and I will be down directly,' she said. 'I made them a promise, and I must keep it. I am glad they are here; they can witness the will, now that Mark Runham and Leehanna Tunkiss are gone.'

Drownlands was surprised. The girl had regained her composure; and from the look of her face he was assured that she had formed her resolution.

'That is right,' said he; 'things remain as arranged.'

'I cannot go away,' said Zita in a low voice. 'Here I am, and here I must remain. If I have

done wrong to stay here, the wrong is done. If I have been foolish to accept your hospitality, the folly is past recall.' She looked over her shoulder to see that Sarah had withdrawn.

'Yes; I promised you I would remain here, and here I will remain, on a condition.'

He held up the will.

'Yes, on condition that you leave everything you have as I shall direct.'

'I leave it all to you.'

'The will must be written afresh,' said Zita; 'a change must be made in it. You have bequeathed everything to me, and because of that, evil thoughts will rise up in folks' minds, and evil words will pass over their lips. Even Mark thinks ill of me. I did not think Mark could have done that.' She heaved a sigh, and drew her hand across her eyes.

'Master,' said she, after a pause, 'you had no right to make that will and leave me all. I am not your niece. I shall never stand nearer to

you than I do now. I have no claim on your house or lands. But Kainie has. She is your own sister's child. You must alter your will and leave everything to her.'

'I said I would give her nought.'

'And that made Mark believe me to be bad. I will not have anything of yours. I will have you make the writing out anew, and bequeath everything to Kainie—on the same condition, if you will, that I remain here all your days. I do not say, Give Kainie everything now. I have no right to say that. I do not say, Give me nothing at any time. I shall have a right to some payment, or some acknowledgment of my services. But what I do say is that I will not be your heir hereafter. Kainie has a claim on you that I have not. If I were to be enriched with house and lands by you, then the evil that is thought of me would be confirmed. But folks may say what they will, when, some day, after you are gone, the property changes hands

and falls to Kainie; they cannot think I have been so wicked as was supposed. And I shall have repaid you for your kindness to me, in that I have saved you from committing a great injustice. Mark said I would do anything—sell body and soul—for profit. He will come to see that he was wrong there.'

Drownlands gazed on the girl with incredulity. She had hit on an arrangement that had not suggested itself to his mind. He could not believe that she was serious in her purpose.

'I will remain with you,' continued Zita, 'on the clear understanding that Kainie is to be your heir, and I would wish this understanding to be generally made known. Some day, when I am old and ugly, and you are dead and gone, then, when the new folks come into Prickwillow, I'll harness the horse and start as a Cheap Jack once more. Then I can take a man to mind the horse, when I do the business of a Cheap Jack. No one can say wrong of me

then. When Mark Runham comes into this place'—

'Mark Runham will never be here.'

'He must be here, if this falls some day to Kainie.'

'That does not follow.'

'Of course it follows, if he marries Kainie.'

'Mark — marry Kainie? What do you mean?'

'I told you that Mark would have nothing more to say to me, because he was bound to another. I would not say to whom, for that was his secret. But now he has let it out himself. He is going to take Kainie home to Crumbland this evening.'

Drownlands started and threw over a chair.

'You are mistaken. You do not know.' He paced the room in agitation.

'I do know,' answered Zita. 'It is because he was bound to Kainie that he gave me up. Now he is going to take her to him for better

for worse. Lawk! how dull men are in these matters—where girls see clear.'

'You are greatly mistaken.'

'No, I am not mistaken. How can you fail to understand when he speaks so plain?'

Drownlands folded his arms and walked hurriedly up and down the room. Presently he turned to Zita and said, 'You are serious when you say you will not have me make you my heir?'

'I am truly resolved,' answered the girl. 'Then he can no more say that I have sold myself body and soul for profits.'

'Let no will be made.'

'That will not do. You must rewrite it, and it must make Kainie your heir. Only on that condition will I remain in this house with you.'

'And you believe her to be your rival, who has snatched Mark from your arms?'

'I know it is so. He could not help himself. He was tied to her.'

'Mark is a Runham. A Runham may betray a woman, but never marry one who has no fortune.'

'More is the reason why you should give one to Kainie.'

'Were I to make you my heir,—there is no saying,—he might take you for the sake of this place and my savings; and, by Heaven, I will have no Runham own acres of mine, if I can prevent it!'

'He would not do that—he could not take me. He is too just and true to throw over Kainie. He may think ill of me, but I do not think so badly of him. I tried to buy of her the rights she had in him, but she would not sell them. Then I saw it was all up between Mark and me.'

'This is strange—this is very strange!' said Drownlands, turning a perplexed face on the girl as he paced the room. 'I know what is in a Runham better than you. The Runhams

marry for money, not for love. Come here, Zita. What would you say were you to discover that you were mistaken about Mark and Kainie?'

'I am not mistaken.'

'Suppose, some day, that you found that he was free?'

She was silent.

'And yet he would never marry you without money. He would not be a Runham to do that. If, however, he thought you were to be my heir, he might do so, or wait till I am gone and then take you; but he will never think of you if you are poor. Be it as you propose. I will rewrite my will. I will leave to you nothing, bequeath to Kainie all.'

'Then I will remain with you.'

'As long as I live?'

She nodded her head.

'You will swear to this?'

Her eyes were full, her bosom heaving; she held out both hands, and he clasped them.

'I must go downstairs,' she said, after a struggle to gain composure. 'The justices will want their toasting-forks.'

'Keep them amused for a while. They shall witness my new will.'

Zita proceeded to her room, found the articles that she had promised, and descended to the sitting-room, where she found three of the magistrates, all laymen; the clerical members of the Bench thinking it unecclesiastical to come after toasting-forks. The red-faced chairman, Mr. Christian, was there; Admiral Abbott; and another, named Wilkins. They were all merry; they had been drinking, and they felt sensible relief that they were not cumbered by the presence of the ecclesiastical magistrates. They were also conscious of great buoyancy of spirits, due to the fact that they were beyond the shadow of the towers of Ely, and no longer within the numbing circle of cathedral decorum. Zita's arrival was hailed uproariously, with

laughter and loud words. The gentlemen jumped from their chairs, and with effusion insisted on shaking hands.

'We've rode over,' said Mr. Christian, 'but couldn't persuade Sir Bates to mount a horse again. The very looks of one makes his colour fade. Nothing would induce him — not the prospect of a toasting-fork. I say, Abbott, if we could have promised the canon a kiss of those ruby lips, eh? Would that have drawn him? How now, you comical Jill?—you who upset the dignity of the Court! And to venture on bribery and corruption—you pretty little rogue! We might have had you up. What say you, Abbott? Shall we indict her for the attempt to poison the springs of justice? It is a case under common law. Fine or imprisonment? Which shall it be, Wilkins?'

'Now, come,' said the magistrate addressed, 'no law here; we have had enough of that to-day. Here are weapons. Arm thee, arm

thee, Sir Christian, knight of the blazing countenance and the purple nose. Queen of Cheap Jacks, let your gay red-flowered kerchief be the prize. I defy thee to the death, Christian. Up with you on to the table, Queen of Cheap Jacks, or upon the mantelshelf—anywhere away from the clash of blades and the soil of battle. Come on, Christian! And after thee, Old Salt the Admiral; but, Lord! he will swash about with his toasting-fork as if 'twere a cutlass. Come on, Christian, and he who wins rides home wearing her favour.'

Justice Wilkins brandished one of the toasting-forks, and, putting himself in a posture of attack, shouted again for his opponent.

Mr. Christian at once snatched and flourished his weapon, and the two half-tipsy men began to make passes at each other.

'Bright eyes looking on! A fair maid's favour as the prize! Ah, Christian, you're off your guard; you are using your foil wildly.

The man is drunk! Heigh! To the heart! I have run you through! Down with your blade, sir!' Wilkins shouted as he charged home, and drove the toasting-fork up into the handle against the breast of his adversary. 'Abbott! gallop off for Sir Bates! Make him come to shrive Christian. Rest his soul! he was a jolly dog, but too fond of lasses and the bottle. Admiral, help me; we will compose his epitaph. No, no, Christian, that is a breach of rules. You're dead, man; dead as a stone, with a stroke through your heart. Didn't you feel the toasting-fork tickle your ribs? Stand aside, or lie dead on the hearthrug. You are out of the game now. Come on, Admiral Abbott. It lies between you and me; Christian, you dog, you are dead, and must not interfere. That stroke will let some of the port wine out of your gizzard. Keep in the rear—you are a dead man. If you walk, it is your ghost. It is Abbott's turn with me now.'

'Wilkins, your tongue runs away with you. I'll cut it off and wear it in my hat. I'm your man.'

Thereupon Admiral Abbott, armed with his toasting-fork, strutted into the place lately occupied by Christian.

'No,' said he; 'Wilkins, you cheat; you took a scurvy advantage over my dear deceased brother Christian. You shall not play me the same trick. You have the window behind you.'

'I did not consider it. Change sides.'

'No, I will not have the advantage over you either. We will fight with the daylight athwart our blades.'

'Then the Queen of Cheap Jacks must shift quarters, to see that all is fair.'

'Let her shift,' said Abbott. 'I am not going to be killed or to kill you at a disadvantage. Ready!'

The passage of arms between Wilkins and

Abbott was as brief as that between him and Christian. A stroke from the admiral, who used his tool as a cutlass, bent the soft metal of the toasting-fork of his opponent.

'Weapon broken. Surrender!' shouted Abbott. 'Now, Wilkins, stand aside. I am conqueror, and claim the red rag.'

'That's a way to ask! Like the bear you are, Abbott. Down on one knee—I won't say gracefully, for you can't do that—and ask in courteous tone. Red rag indeed!—a crimson favour.'

'He can't kneel,' said Christian. 'He'd never get up if he were once down.'

'Admiral! I could swear the Cheap Jack Queen has been crying. There are tears on her cheek and a drench of rain in her brown eyes. It is for you, Christian, you lucky dog; you caused them to fall, because I ran you through, and Her Royal Highness weeps for her knight bleeding his life-tide away.'

At this moment Drownlands entered the room, and was saluted by the three magistrates.

'We have been fighting,' said the admiral, 'and I am the conqueror. If you are disposed to part with the pretty housekeeper, I will carry her off *en croupe* on my horse.'

Drownlands disdained an answer.

'Gentlemen,' said he, 'now that you are here, let me ask a favour of you. Pray put your hands to this paper and witness my signature to this my last will and testament.'

'I hope you have put the Queen of Cheap Jacks down for something handsome. If you have done that, we will sign cheerfully.'

'Not for a penny,' answered Drownlands. 'Everything I have goes to my niece. Here is ink and here a pen. Gentlemen, this is my true act and deed.'

'My hand shakes,' said Christian; 'I have been laughing, and cannot hold a pen.'

'And mine is jarred,' said Wilkins, 'with the thundering blows of that swashbuckler, Abbott.'

Jesting, laughing, the three men complied with the request of Drownlands, hardly regarding what they were about.

'I say, Abbott,' said Wilkins, 'what was that promise that fell from ruby lips relative to an epergne?'

'We were to raffle for one,' said the admiral.

'Can't do it,' said Christian. 'We have not got the others here. We'll hoist Bates on to a horse and make him come another day, when this confounded business of the riots is over.'

'You have got the favour, Abbott,' said Wilkins, 'but not by fair swordsmanship. Whether you carry it to Ely is another matter. Christian, shall he hoist it at the end of his toasting-fork and ride? We'll give him a hundred yards, and then pursue, and he who

overtakes, captures the favour and carries it into the city.'

'Done—we'll race the admiral for it.' Then, turning to Zita, 'We'll come another day and raffle for the epergne at a guinea apiece. The pool goes to you. Now then, brother justices, away we go!'

CHAPTER XXXV

THE JACK O' LANTERNS

'TAKE it, and keep it,' said Drownlands, handing the will to Zita. 'You can read. It is as you desired, and on the same condition as before. That is as you promised.'

'Yes,' said the girl; 'with that I am content.'

She put the will in her bosom.

'Then,' said Drownlands in a tone of sad bitterness, 'for life and till death we are united.'

'After a fashion, to keep apart.'

'Yes, united to be separate.'

'Like a pair of wheels,' said Zita. 'They keep the concern going, but have it always between them.'

The day had closed in, and Zita retired to her

room to sit at the window and look out at the dead uniformity of the fen, and the white line of horizon between it and the darkness above, like a white fringe to a pall. She desired solitude, that she might review what was past.

The weather was cold. There had been frost, hard and biting, and the ice clad the water. The snow that had been spread over the land had in part disappeared, licked up by the dry wind that scaled the waters, and the land from whiteness had turned to blackness.

The lakes of frozen water would have attracted many skaters during the day, had not the engrossing excitement relative to the trial of the rioters engaged the public attention.

The frost had set in with redoubled hardness on the morrow of the riot, and in four days even the Lark was turned to stone within its embankments.

As Zita looked out into the night, she could see the heavy sky, burdened with black clouds,

that were ragged as a torn fringe, or a moth-eaten pall, about the black hard bank of the river, that stood up sharply against the sky.

The cold was so biting in the fireless room that Zita drew the velvet curtains about her, which were suspended over her window, covered her shoulders, and wrapped them about her bosom. There was no light in the room save the wan reflection from the horizon. Had there been, she would have formed a pretty picture, folded in crimson velvet, with her oval face and dark amber hair peeping out of the folds.

She looked dreamily through the window.

A wave of regret had come over her after the exaltation caused by the sense of self-sacrifice.

She considered how that she had loved Mark, had valued his regard for herself, had delighted in his society. He had never said to her that he loved her, yet there had been a look in his blue eyes, a pressure of his fingers when he took her hand, a softness of intonation in his

voice when he spoke to her, that had said more than words, that had assured her heart that she was dear to him. And how happy she had been when she believed that! A solitary child, with no belongings and belonging to none, a waif thrown upon the desolate fens, she had found herself lifted into a new region of brightness. Then Mark had become cool, and had held aloof from her. She had discovered that he was engaged to Kainie, and could not become disentangled from this tie. He had been constrained to resign himself to it. Now his interest, his sympathies, were enlisted on behalf of that girl, because she was treated with injustice and was exposed to danger. Now he was about to take Kainie to his house—now, this very evening.

A feeling of resentment against the girl who stood between herself and happiness swelled in Zita's heart; Kainie threw down the palace of delight she had built up in the cloudland of hope and fancy. Kainie snatched Mark from

her; and it was for Kainie that she—Zita—had given up the inheritance offered her by Drownlands.

In the darkness Zita's brow darkened. Angry feelings surged in her bosom and sent waves of fire through her pulses. She would defy the world. What need she care for the chatter of slanderous tongues? Conscious of her own integrity, she would brave public opinion.

She snatched the will from her bosom, that she might tear it in pieces, and then she would run to the master and bid him make another in her own favour, as first proposed. Why should she not be his heir?

If Kainie robbed her of Mark, might not she retaliate and take from her the inheritance of Drownlands?

If she were struck, might she not strike back? Did Kainie need lands and houses? As Mark's wife, she would be rich without her uncle's estate added to Crumbland, whereas she—Zita—had

not a particle of soil on which to set her foot and say it was her own. Had not the master of Prickwillow a right to do what he would with his own? Kainie had done nothing for him, and she—Zita—was devoting her life to his service.

As she looked out of the window, musing on these things, she saw that the light on the horizon had faded, or that the great curtain of cloud had set over it and had obscured it. Something, where she believed that the embankment ran, now attracted, without greatly engaging, her attention.

A minute flash of light travelled a little distance, and was then extinguished. Presently another wavering speck appeared, and then again all was dark.

'The Jack o' Lanterns are about,' said Zita.

Her thoughts recurred to her troubles.

A recoil of better feeling set in and washed over her heart.

'No,' said she, 'I could not have borne it. It would have killed me to have Mark believe that I was sold body and soul. Let him take Kainie, and with Kainie let him have Prickwillow when it falls ;—but let him not think ill of me.'

She started up. She replaced the will in her bosom.

'I will go to Red Wings,' she said. 'He is there with Kainie. He said he would take her away this night. I will go and tell him all. I will show him what I have here ;' she touched her bosom where lay the will. 'When he has heard my story and has seen that, he will think better of me.'

She descended the staircase. At the foot she found the master.

'There are Jack o' Lanterns in the fens,' she said.

'Folks say that they have seen them,' he replied. 'I never have. They were plentiful before so much marsh was reclaimed.'

'I have seen them,' said Zita.

'Pshaw!' laughed he. 'There are no Jack o' Lanterns in winter. Whither are you going?'

'On the embankment; perhaps on the ice. I wish to be alone.'

She drew a shawl over her head and opened the door. Drownlands followed her to the doorstep.

At that moment he also for a moment saw a twinkle on the embankment.

'That is what you call Jack o' Lanterns,' said he. 'It is some ganger going home. Shall I attend you?'

'I desire to be alone.'

Then Drownlands went within, and Zita walked on till she reached the highway that ran below the embankment. It was so dark there that she mounted the steep slope, so as to have the advantage of what little light still hung in the sky and was reflected by the frozen surface of the river.

As she ascended, an uneasy sensation came over her—a feeling that she was in the presence of human beings whom she neither saw nor heard. She stood still, listening. Then, stepping forward, she was again conscious that she was close upon some invisible person. Feeling alarmed, Zita was about to retrace her steps, when a light was flashed in her eyes and a hand grasped her shoulder. Thereupon a voice said in a low tone, 'It is that wench of Drownlands'.' Then she was aware that several men surrounded her. They had been crouching on the ground for concealment, at the sound of her approaching foot. Now they rose and pressed about her. She could distinguish that these were all men, and that they had black kerchiefs over their faces with holes cut in them, through which their eyes peered. One alone was not so disguised, and he it was who spoke to her.

'Unhappy girl! You do not return. Go

your ways along the bank, and no harm will be done to you. We have no quarrel with you, but we have with your master. This night we strike off a score, pay a debt.'

The voice was that of Ephraim Beamish.

'Throw her in. Send her under the ice. She's a bad lot,' said one of the men.

'Make an end of all that belongs to Tiger Ki,' said another.

'We do not fight with women,' said Beamish. 'She shall go, but not return to Prickwillow.'

'What are you about? What harm are you doing?' asked Zita.

'We are serving out chastisement to your master for what he has done to our lads,' answered Pip.

'You will not hurt him?'

'Not in person.'

'What, then, will you do?'

'Go your way. We are letting the water out over his land.'

Ephraim conducted Zita a little way along the tow-path on the bank.

'Attend to me,' said he. 'Go anywhere you will except back to Prickwillow. We have our men drawn across the way. You cannot pass, it is in vain for you to attempt it. Keep to the bank, and keep at a distance from us.'

'Where is Mark Runham?'

'I have not seen him.'

'He is not in this affair with you?'

'Mark? of course he is not. He knows nothing of our purpose.'

Zita advanced along the path. She was uneasy; desirous, if possible, to warn Drownlands.

Presently she heard a rush of water.

She turned, and was caught almost immediately by one of the men.

'It is of no use your attempting to go home,' he said. 'It is of no use your thinking of telling Tiger Ki to be on his guard. It is now too

late.' The man took her wrist and said, 'Go your way, but take care not to step on the ice—not as you value your life.'

'The ice?—why so?'

'Listen.'

A shrill whine—then a crash. The icy surface of the Lark had split, then gone down in fragments under its own weight, as the water that had sustained it was withdrawn.

CHAPTER XXXVI

A RETURN BLOW

ZITA hurried along the tow-path. Her mind was in a tumult. The full force of the words of Ephraim she could not understand. He and his comrades were letting the waters of the river Lark over Drownlands' farm, that she knew; but to what an extent they would overflow, and what amount of injury they might do, that was what she was incapable of judging. It was a relief to her mind that no personal violence was contemplated. The water that was let out could be pumped back again. The Fens were wont to be flooded at times, and the mills could always throw the flood from off them.

It was natural that her thoughts should revert to certain words that had been dropped by the men — words that had fallen on her ears like drops of fire. Why had Pip Beamish spoken to her as an 'unhappy girl'? Why had she been referred to as 'belonging to Drownlands,' as 'Tiger Ki's wench'? The tone in which these words had been used had conveyed more insult than the words themselves. They implied that she was sold, as Mark had said, body and soul, to the master of Prickwillow. Mark was not alone in his ill opinion of her.

How had this opinion come to be formed? Surely not from the fact that she was staying on in the house where she had been sheltered when her father died? Every one must know that it was impossible for her to leave it, unless she deserted her van and her wares.

There had been nothing in Drownlands' conduct towards her in public to breed this opinion. The spring of the scandal must have been in

Leehanna Tunkiss. That woman had viewed the presence of Zita at Prickwillow with jealousy, and had come to hate her.

In the first gush of womanly sympathy with a forlorn child, left solitary, bereaved of her only parent, the housekeeper had urged Zita to accept the hospitality offered her, and had welcomed her when she transferred herself from the van in the outhouse into a room in the farm dwelling. But no sooner did the keen eye of Leehanna observe that Drownlands watched Zita with interest, and that the girl was acquiring an extraordinary influence over him, than her envy was roused, and she was filled with alarm lest her own position should be undermined, and she should have to make way for the girl whom she had so readily taken under the shelter of Prickwillow roof.

Zita had not failed to notice the growing malevolence exhibited towards her by this woman. She had endeavoured to keep out of

her way, but had not laid much store on her ill-humour. Now she saw, or suspected, that Leehanna had been poisoning the minds of the neighbourhood against her, and she had little doubt that the alienation of Mark was due in a measure to the slanders of Mrs. Tunkiss.

Presently Zita saw the light that shone from Kainie's window. The girl had not as yet deserted her habitation. A little muslin blind was drawn across the casement, and the candle-light shone hazily through that. During the frost, when the waters were chained down, the windmills were not worked, so that there was no immediate necessity for a successor to take the place of the girl-miller. No doubt that Mark would inform the Commissioners that Kainie's charge of the mill was at an end, and that it was incumbent on them to immediately look out for a successor. But Kainie had not as yet departed, though it might be she was preparing for her 'flitting.'

Had Mark come for her? Was he with her now? Or was she sitting in her cottage with throbbing heart, waiting for him to arrive?

Was it a fact that Mark Runham grasped at money? It was not true. Drownlands had charged him falsely in that. He was taking Kainie, who had nothing. With a twinge, Zita thought how that she herself was enriching her rival with what might, had she willed it, become her own. With a sickness at heart, Zita looked forward to the day when Kainie would join the acres of Prickwillow to those of Crumbland, and bid Zita go forth a wanderer and destitute—and it was her own doing.

Was she one who sold body and soul for profits? She might have been Drownlands' wife; she had refused this. She might have been his heir; she had refused that: and Kainie reaped all the advantages that sprang out of her refusals.

No! There was something that was dearer to Zita even than profits.

As Zita approached Red Wings, the dog, standing on the brick platform, began to bark. Zita called to him, and he came to her bounding. On her former visits she had brought Wolf something in her pocket. Now that he reached her, he thrust his nose into her hand beseechingly.

She halted at the tuft of thorn-bushes and flags below the platform, and seated herself there, throwing her arm round the dog. She would not present herself at the door of the hut, and receive a rough greeting from Kainie. She would wait and see whether Mark were there before she made her presence known. The explanation she had to make, the story to tell, she would in preference make and tell to Mark. She did not forget that she had struck Kainie, and she knew that her chances of placing her conduct in a favourable light were greater with a man than with a woman.

A dark figure of a man issued from the cottage door and stood on the platform, looking

round. After a moment he went back to the door, saying—

'There is no one that I can see, but the night is dark, Kainie.'

The voice was that of Mark.

He did not re-enter the cottage, but, standing where he was, he said—

'Come, Kainie, it is time for us to be off. My mother is expecting you.'

The girl issued from the hovel.

'Mark,' said she, 'has she really consented to receive me?'

'Yes, she has.'

'Yet I know that she has refused to see me, and even to hear about me.'

'That is true, but now she has given way. I could not allow you to remain here. I took a firm stand with my mother, and she admitted that I was right, and yielded. Now, have you got all ready for the sledge?'

'I have packed everything.'

'Then jump on to the sleigh, and I will run you along upon the ice, which is in prime condition.'

Zita's arm convulsively nipped the dog.

How happy she had been on that day when Mark had run her along on the ice on the same bones that were now to bear her successful rival!

Wolf protested against the pressure of her arm by a growl.

'Where are you, Wolf?' called Mark.

Zita released the dog, and he sprang upon the platform.

'I wonder what the old fellow means,' said the young man. 'He does not usually give false alarms. I daresay he's puzzled at our proceedings. Something affecting his interests is in view, Kainie, and he can't understand it. It is so dark one can't see far; but had any one been coming, he would have given tongue lustily.'

'Perhaps it may be Pip.'

'Pip will have to be careful for the next day or two. If he be caught, 'twill go hard with him for certain.'

'But you will get him away from the Fens?'

'Yes. I am making arrangements. If he can keep hidden for a few more days and nights, I shall have managed matters, and be able to clear him off; to clear him not only from the Fens, but out of England. Now, however, we must think of you. Take with you only such traps as you need immediately, and which you can carry in your arms or on your lap. I'll return for the rest to-morrow.'

'I shall leave the fire burning and the light on the table.'

'Yes, for Pip when he comes. Folk will think nothing of seeing the light, making sure it is yours. He can hide here till I am ready to send him away; and Wolf shall remain to give him notice if any one approaches. I'll tie him up.'

Kainie re-entered the cottage, and Mark pro-

ceeded to tie Wolf by a piece of twine that he had in his pocket.

Whilst he was thus engaged, Kainie came out with her little package, and stood watching the proceedings of the young man.

The dog was restless, and objected to being fastened.

'Don't be angry with me, Mark,' said Kainie, 'if I ask you a question.

'No; what may it be?'

'It concerns that wretched creature — that Cheap Jack girl. You were rather taken with her at first, Mark, till you found out what she was. You are quite sure you don't fancy her no longer?'

The young fellow had been stooping over the dog. He stood up and said gravely—

'Kainie! I regard her now no more than I do the dirt under my soles.'

'Hark! what is that?'

The sound was that of a gasp or sob.

'There is certainly some one here,' said Mark. 'Bring a light.'

'You need not,' said Zita, rising from behind the thorns. 'It is I.'

'You here, Zita?'

'Yes. I heard what you said of me.'

'I am sorry for that.'

'It is cruelly false.'

'I cannot go into that matter. What has brought you here at this time o' night?'

'What has brought her here?' repeated Kainie. 'There is no need to ask that, Mark; the wretched creature is running after you.'

'You must go back,' said the young man.

'Yes, go back—to your dear master,' sneered Kainie.

'I must speak. I must justify myself,' said Zita, with vehemence. 'You wrong me in your thoughts; you wrong me in your words. I am not what you suppose. I am not a bold, bad girl. I do not sell myself for profits. I am in Drown-

lands' house because I cannot help myself. I have nowhere else whither to go. Why should you and Kainie believe evil of me? Why should'—

'I cannot argue with you,' said Mark. 'This is not the place; this is not the time. I am sorry for you. I can say no more. I thought better of you once.'

'Go, you Cheap Jackess,' said Kainie. 'Unless you had a heart lost to shame, you'd not have come here after Mark at night.'

'You misjudge me in this as in other things,' said Zita, bursting into tears. 'I came here for your good.'

'That's a fine tale,' sneered Kainie. 'We want no good from you, nor do we expect figs of thistles or grapes of thorns.'

Mark said nothing, but stepped from the platform.

'I entreat you to listen to me,' said Zita, catching his arm. 'It is not true that Drownlands has left me everything.'

'I cannot attend to this now,' said he, disengaging himself from her grasp. But she again seized him.

'Unsay what you said!' she exclaimed. Her anger was rising and overmastering her grief. 'Unsay those ugly words—that I am the dirt under your feet.'

'I said—but never mind. I regret that you overheard me use such an expression.'

'That is not unsaying it.'

Kainie came up and struck Zita with the full force of her heavy hand across the face.

'Take that,' she said; 'I have owed it you. Now the debt is repaid.'

Then she stepped on the ice with a 'Mark, I am ready.'

'Go!' cried Zita in towering wrath, stung with pain, maddened with humiliation. 'Go—go under the ice, both of you! I care not! I care not!'

CHAPTER XXXVII

A CATHERINE WHEEL

THE words were hardly out of Zita's mouth before they were repented. The anger, the desire for revenge, which had spurted up in her heart, was abated as rapidly as it had risen.

Once before she had spoken in violence of anger, and had speedily contradicted her words by her acts. She had bidden Mark go and be hanged or transported for aught she cared; yet no sooner did she learn that he was in actual danger, than she had interfered to deliver him. She had fought for him with Drownlands, and had thrust herself into the witness-box to exculpate him.

Stinging now under the moral pain of the sense of wrong done to her, that wounded her in her honour, stinging also under the physical pain caused by the blow of Kainie, a girl for whom she had made the greatest sacrifices, in a blind and inconsiderate explosion of resentment, she had allowed Mark and Kainie, unwarned of their danger, to commit themselves to the treacherous ice.

Repentance came too late. The words had been spoken which hinted danger, but the hint was too vague to be regarded, even to be understood. Mark had started, running Kainie on his sledge over the polished surface of the channel, before Zita had recovered herself and realised what would be the consequences of her neglect.

Then, with a cry, the girl ran along the bank. She called to Mark, imploring him to return. She called, telling him that the ice was broken. Then she stayed, out of breath, her pulses

bounding, the sweat streaming off her brow, and the tears racing down her cheeks.

She found that it was not possible for her to catch up the sledge, that flew like a swallow over the glassy ice, and which was invisible in the darkness. She found that the wind was blowing in her face, and carrying her voice behind her, away from those whose attention she desired to arrest.

In her despair, she threw herself on her knees and beat her head and breast.

'I am worse than what they thought of me! I am worse than that murderer Drownlands. He killed one, and I kill two. Oh that I had died in their place!'

Again she sprang to her feet, and again she cried to those who were speeding far away, and bade them return. She was sensible, as she called, that she could do nothing to arrest them in their course. The horror of the situation was insupportable, and in a wave of

despair that swept over her, Zita was ready to fling herself into the canal.

There are moments of life when instantaneously a whole prospect opens before the inner eye—call that eye what you will. In a second of time Zita saw the consequences of her neglect mirrored before her with intense and terrible vividness. It was as though the whole sequence of events that must follow was unrolled before her eye, and, clear as in broadest day, she saw the sledge, propelled by Mark, approach the dangerous spot where the arch of ice stood unsupported, and when the additional weight was thrown on it, must come crashing down. She heard the whine of the cracking surface, as the sleigh reached it. She saw the whole mass of ice, together with sleigh, Mark, and Kainie, go down with a crash, impelled by the velocity of the pace at which they had been going—saw them shoot under the water, and the sheets of fractured ice that encumbered the surface of the

shrunken river. She heard the cry of Mark, the scream of Kainie. She saw them battling with their hands beneath the surface. It was to her as though she were looking from above on the glassy sheet that lay broken, but yet encasing the water. She could see through it, and watch the expiring efforts of Mark and Kainie, behold them struggling with their hands to break through or push aside the ice-plate that lay between their mouths and air. She could see their straining eyes fixed reproachfully on her through the transparent screen. In her fancy she was now running and beckoning to the only patch of open water through which escape was possible. And yet they would not attend; either they misunderstood her signals, or they mistrusted her motives.

She beheld how their efforts relaxed, their palms patted listlessly against the ice, their fingers picked with feeble effort at the cracks, how the light of intelligence died out of

their eyes, how their lips gasped and drew in water.

Then to her fancy they went down, Kainie first, Mark next.

After that there rose about her, as a cloud, a mass of black figures, pointing at her with their fingers, and from every finger-point flashed an electric spark.

'Murderess — double murderess! Thou who didst judge Drownlands, judge thine own self. Thou who didst condemn, condemn thyself.'

Then Wolf came to her. He had gnawed through the cord that had bound him.

Zita clasped him round the neck.

'Oh, Wolf! Wolf!' she cried. 'Go after them —fly—stay them. Snap at Mark's clothes. Bite Kainie. Hold them back!'

She indicated the direction that the sledge had taken, and the dog ran out on the ice.

Zita looked after him. Would he be able to

track them on the frozen sheet? Would the scent lie on the congealed water?

If Wolf did come up with his mistress and Mark, would he be able to arrest their course? Did he understand the message, the order given him? Would he, bounding forward in advance of the sledge, discover for himself the danger that lay ahead, and come back and warn them?

Should this attempt to stay the sleigh fail, were there no other means available?

Then an idea flashed through the brain of Zita. There remained one chance of staying their career.

Instantly Zita ran to the hut, burst open the door, and, seizing the mattress of Kainie's bed, dragged it forth across the platform, and threw it under the stationary sails of the mill.

Then she went back to the cottage, and, gathering up the red embers of the fire in a shovel, ran with them forth again, and threw them upon the straw mattress.

Next she stood, shovel in hand, waiting the result, watching as the fire burnt its way through the ticking and buried itself in the straw.

For a moment there ensued a red glare—an eating outward of the ticking by fiery teeth—then a ghost-like flame leaped up, and wavered above the incandescent mass. It threw itself high into the air, as though it were independent of the fire below, then returned and dipped its feet in the red ashes. With the shovel Zita stirred the ignited mass. Then the mattress broke into flame, and the flame reared itself in many tongues, swayed with the wind, curled over, broke into a multitude of orange fire-flashes that capered and pirouetted about the glowing heart of fire, as though the fabled Salamanders had manifested themselves, and rejoiced in being able to dance in their proper element. In another moment the flames had ignited the sail that hung above them, and were racing each other up the canvas.

Zita sped to the clog. She had learned from Kainie how a windmill was to be set in motion, and how the revolution of the sails was to be arrested, on the first visit she had paid to Red Wings. She now raised the clog, and with a sigh and creak the arms began to turn. As they did so, the sail which was on fire swept from the bed of flames that had kindled it, and was replaced by another. Instantly Zita stopped the revolution, to allow it also to be kindled. In like manner she treated the remaining sails, and when all blazed, she allowed them to spin unhampered in the breeze.

A wondrous sight in the black night! The mill sails whirling in the freezing blast sent forth streamers of flame and a rain of sparks. Every now and then there dropped from them incandescent tears. They roared as they went round, forming, as they rotated on the axle, a mighty wheel of dazzling light. Zita stood looking up at her work, and for a moment for-

got the occasion of the setting fire to the wheel in the overwhelming effect produced by the brilliancy of the spectacle. The wind not only made the canvas glare, but kindled as well the stretchers of lath to which it was fastened, and the mainbeams likewise. The ties by which the sail-cloth was fastened were of tarred cord. As the fire consumed a portion, the rest slipped forth, and flew away in lurid lines of light.

The platform was illumined, as though a blaze of July sun had fallen on it. The window-panes of the cottage were transmuted into flakes of gold-leaf. The dykes reflected the flashing sails and shot the light along in streaks through the dark fen into the outer darkness beyond.

A number of bats that had been harboured by the old mill, and were sleeping through the winter, were roused by the light, quickened by the heat, and came forth in flights, dazed, to flit on leather wings about the platform, to dart

into the wheel of fire, and to fly back scorched, and to fall crippled at Zita's feet.

Wolf came up cowering. He had been unable to trace the course of his mistress on the ice, and he crouched moaning at Zita's feet, his eyes watching the fiery revolutions, but ever and anon starting back with a snap and a whine as some disabled bat clawed at him, and endeavoured to scramble up his side.

Would the whole mill fall a prey to the flames?

Ignited, molten tar was flung off as fire dross by the whirling sails, masses of burning canvas were carried off on the wind. The sails for a while moved more slowly. The canvas was in part consumed, but the flame itself seemed to form a sheet over the ribs, and incite the wind to act with redoubled force; for again, with renewed activity, the great arms continued their rotation.

Every rush in the dyke was made visible,

standing out as a rod of burnished gold, and the withered tassels of seed glowed scarlet, against a background of night made doubly sombre by the dazzling splendour of the burning mill sails.

The boarded and tarred body of the mill was changed in the lurid glare into a structure of red copper. In the heat given off by the wings, the tar dissolved and ran down from the movable cap, as though the great bulk of the mill were sweating in an agony of fear lest the fire should reach and consume it also.

A barn-owl hovered aloft, and the glare smote on its white breast and under-wings. It to-whooed in its terror, and its cry could be heard above the rush of the sails and the roar of the flames.

There were other sounds that combined with the hooting of the owl, the rush of the sails and of the fire. The mechanism of the mill was in motion; the huge axle revolved and throbbed like a great pulse running through the body of

the structure, the wheels creaked and groaned, the paddles laboured to drive the water up the incline, and the water when it came produced strange sounds beneath the ice, gasps and gulps. It was as though the dykes were sobbing at the combustion and destruction of the engine which had so long and so steadily laboured to drain them.

When the fire reached iron and copper nails and bands, and heated the metals to white heat, they became incandescent, and gave forth streams of green and blue flame, that glowed with the marigold yellow and tiger-lily red of the blazing wood and tar, forming of the fiery circle a rainbow complete in its prismatic tints. The clouds that passed overhead were flushed and palpitated, reflecting the fire below.

Notwithstanding the anguish of mind that possessed Zita, her anxiety for the fate of Mark and Kainie, and her self-reproach, she was carried away, out of all such thoughts, by

the transcendent splendour of the spectacle. She stood looking up at the wheel of light, with hands clasped to her bosom, hardly breathing, her face illumined as though she had been looking into the sun.

Then, suddenly, a hand was laid roughly on her shoulder, and an agitated voice said in her ear, 'Good heavens! what have you done?—wicked, malignant girl!'

Zita dropped on her knees, with a cry of mingled joy and pain.

'Thank God! they are saved!'

She stooped and hid her face in her skirt about her knees. The revulsion of feeling was more than she could bear. She gasped for breath. She came to a full stop in sensation and thought. She could not rise, speak, nor look up. Then relief from acute tension of the mind found itself a way in a flood of tears, and broken words of no meaning and without connection were sobbed forth, and muffled in her gown.

When, finally, she did raise her head, and gather her dazed faculties, and wipe the water from her eyes, she saw that Mark and Kainie were forcing the head of the mill round, so as no longer to present the sails to the wind, but make them face away from it, so as to lessen the danger to the body of the mill, which might at any moment ignite when flame and sparks were swept over it.

They then put on the clog and stopped the movement of the charred arms.

This was almost all that could be done. They trusted that the arms would burn themselves out without the axle catching fire.

'Kainie,' said Mark, 'I'll run a rope up and throw it over the axle, and you can pass me up buckets of water.'

Then he came to where Zita knelt. Kainie was at his side.

'You infamous creature!' said Kainie. 'Why did you do it?'

'To save you and Mark.'

'To save us? That is a fine story.'

'They had let out the water, and the ice is broken up.'

'Let out what water?' asked Mark.

'The water of the river.'

'Who have done this?'

'Why, Pip and some other men.'

'Zita,' said Mark, 'what do you mean? Is there any truth in this?'

'It is true, indeed,' she answered. 'They have done it to revenge themselves on Mr. Drownlands, because he gave evidence against some of their comrades.'

'This is very serious,' said Mark.

'It is quite true. They would not allow me to go back to Prickwillow. I tried, but they stopped me, and forced me to come on this way. I could not warn the master. And they told me to keep off the ice. As I came along, I heard it scream and crack, and go down in a mass together.'

'Why did you not tell me this before?'

'You would not listen to me. You said cruel things of me, and Kainie struck me in the face.'

'And why did you set the mill on fire?'

'To force you to come back. I did not care about your danger till too late. I ran after you, you could not hear me. I knew that if you saw fire at the mill you would return. Nothing but that could bring you back.'

Mark was silent for a moment. Then, with emotion in his voice, he said—

'Zita, I believe we have wronged you grievously.'

'No,' answered the girl, 'it was I who wronged you. I let you go, and said, Go under the ice and be drowned, I did not care.'

'I did not hear you.'

'I said it—instead of telling you of your danger. I was angry—very angry, and I was hurt by Kainie—but'— she hesitated, her voice

faltered—'at the bottom of all was this—I was jealous.'

'Jealous? Jealous of whom?'

'Mark, you had been so kind to me. I had been so happy with you. I even thought you liked me. Then you turned away from me for Kainie.'

'For Kainie?'

There was surprise in his face.

'Yes, you like her best. You are right—she is good, and I am bad—but it made me jealous.'

'Good heavens! You do not understand. There is now no need for further concealment. Kainie is my sister!'

CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE BRENT-GEESE

IT was even as Mark said, but the particulars relative to Kerenhappuch did not come to the knowledge of Zita till some time later.

Jake Runham, the father of Mark, had made the acquaintance of Drownlands' sister, and had betrayed her. Instead of marrying her, he suddenly took a woman who was an heiress, married her for her money, and left Leah Drownlands to her shame.

The secret of Leah's disgrace was well kept. She was sent away to a distance, and when she returned after five years with a child, she would say nothing relative to the parentage of Kainie, nor did her brother proclaim it. Ki never

forgave his sister, and would never hold communication with her or receive her child. Jake Runham naturally enough was reserved on the matter, and no one suspected who the father of Kainie was. The public believed that, to use their own terms, Leah had 'met with a misfortune' whilst away from the Fens.

On her return to the neighbourhood of Prickwillow, the unfortunate woman obtained from the Commissioners the use of the cottage and a small allowance, on consideration of her attending to the mill. This pittance she eked out with needlework. Mark had entertained no suspicion of the relationship so long as his father lived, but on his death there was that provision made in the will which revealed the long-hidden secret. Jake acknowledged his paternity to Kainie, and solemnly required his son to provide for and watch over his half-sister. It seemed probable that he had in the past secretly contributed something towards the

maintenance of Leah Drownlands and her daughter.

These facts were not as yet generally known, but now that Kainie was to be removed to Crumbland, it was inevitable that they should be made public.

The reason why Mark was so resolved to take Kainie away from Red Wings was that she was harbouring and screening Ephraim Beamish, to whom she was attached and engaged. Mark saw that this could not be suffered to continue. He urged the case with his mother, who had strenuously opposed the reception of the girl into the farm, but who now, as a good woman, yielded when she considered the gravity of the circumstances.

Ever since the death of Jake Runham, Kerenhappuch had known the truth. It had been necessary for Mark to tell her of their relationship, and of the obligation that had been laid upon him. At the same time, to save his father's

memory, he urged her to keep the matter secret. This it was which made her reticent with Zita.

'Come,' said Mark. 'Now is not the time for an explanation—nor can I speak of such matters to you without pain, for my father did a great wrong. The question at this moment is—What is to be done? Here is the mill running a risk of being burnt down; on the other hand, there is the water which has been let out, pouring over the Fens. The latter is the most serious concern. If the mill be consumed, it can be rebuilt speedily; but if the fen be flooded, it will take years before it recovers.'

He took Zita's hand in his.

'I do believe I have been unjust. So has Kainie. We owe our lives to you. Kainie, ask her to forgive you the blow you dealt her.'

'No,' said Zita. 'I struck Kainie first, and she gave me the blow back again—harder than I struck her, but that was her profits.'

It seemed probable that the fire smouldering in the ribs of the sails would become extinct. There were matters more urgent, calling Mark elsewhere.

'Pip knew better than advise me of his intent,' said Mark. 'We must have a light.'

He tore one of the stakes from the sails of the mill.

'It will serve as a torch,' said he. 'Run, Kainie, to the bridge, give the alarm to the bankers there. Tell them to bring tools and all needful down the embankment.'

'But they must not take Pip.'

'Pip will have sheered off long before they reach the place. Run, Kainie. Come on, Zita, and show me where the bank has been cut through.'

They walked on together, and their shadows were cast before them by the still glowing mill, which now and then shot up into flame, and then became a smouldering mass.

They walked fast, but not very fast; that was hardly possible on the bank.

For a while Mark said nothing, but he put out his hand, and took that of Zita.

'There has been great misunderstanding,' he said meditatively.

'Yes,' she replied, 'indeed there has. I was jealous because I thought you liked Kainie best.'

'And I—I do not know what I thought; evil things were said, and I was a fool, a cursed fool, to believe them. So—you were jealous?'

'Yes, Mark.'

'You could not have been jealous if you had not cared for me.'

She did not answer.

'And I believe the reason why I gave ear to evil words was because I loved you—loved you so dearly that I was jealous through every thread of my being. I was jealous of that fellow Drownlands. I was an ass to think those

things could be possible that were said of you. I ought to have known you better.'

'Yes, Mark, you ought to have known me better.'

'But it is not now too late. Zita, we will be to each other as we were before—that is, if you can forgive me.'

'Indeed I can forgive you.'

'And I will let all know that we understand each other. And, Zita,' he laughed, 'we'll have the old van and Dobbin'—

'He is Jewel, not Dobbin.'

'And Jewel, brought over to Crumbland.'

'That cannot be, Mark, now.'

'Why not?'

'It is too late.'

'How too late?'

'I have promised Drownlands to remain with him at Prickwillow, and take care of his house as long as he lives.'

'That won't hold. If I make you my wife'—

'That cannot be.'

'Cannot be?—it shall be.'

'No, Mark, I gave you up. I gave up my thoughts of you as a husband in order to get Ki Drownlands to desist from appearing against you in court.'

'He could have done nothing.'

'Whether he could or could not, matters nought now. I made a promise.'

'You must break it.'

She shook her head.

'A deal is a deal.'

Then, as both remained silent, suddenly strange sounds were heard high up in the dark sky, a sound as of barking dogs in full career.

Zita shivered and caught hold of Mark.

'Oh!' she said in a whisper, full of fear. 'They scent a soul—they hunt a soul! Oh, poor soul! God help it! Poor soul—run—run—swift—in at heaven's door!'

'Nonsense, little frightened creature! It is the brent-geese!'

'Mark, last time I heard them it betokened death. Then it was two souls—two flying—flying—and the dogs in full career after them.'

'You, Zita,' laughed Mark, 'do you remember when we spoke of this on the ice, I said when next you heard the brent-geese I hoped I might stand by you. Zita, please God, when the hell-hounds, if such they be,—and I don't believe a word of it,—be let loose, scenting my soul or yours, that I may be by you, or you by me, to cheer each other in the final and dreadful race.'

Zita shuddered.

'Mark, it may not be. I shall stand by Drownlands. I have promised—a deal is a deal.'

CHAPTER XXXIX

THE CUT EMBANKMENT

DROWNLANDS had been for some time in the upstairs room that served as his office. He had brought out his account-books, lighted his lamp, and was endeavouring to engage his thoughts on his expenditure in wages, and to go over the names of his workmen, and strike out such as had taken part in the recent riot. But it was in vain. After a few futile attempts, he leaned his head on his palm, and gave himself over to thoughts of Zita.

It was poor comfort to him to know that she would remain in his house, but it was a comfort. He felt confidence in her—that, having passed

her word to remain, remain she would, whatever might happen. Whatever animadversions might be made on her presence in his house, however deeply her reputation might suffer, she would stay with him. She had passed her word. It was not unlikely, he thought, that some swain might become enamoured of her, and ask her to join her lot with his, but she would refuse him. She would remain an old maid at Prickwillow, because she had passed her word. Not for a moment did Drownlands' faith in Zita give way. She had impressed the man indelibly with a conviction of her sincerity. Zita as a Cheap Jack was one thing, Zita in private life was another. She had one conscience for her dealings with the general public, another conscience for her dealings with individuals face to face. The sun might rise in the west and go down in the Orient sky, but Zita could not fail to keep her word.

Drownlands was startled from his reverie by

the maid Sarah, who rushed in at the door, exclaiming—

'Master, the water be out!'

'What water?'

'The boy says the fen is flooded.'

'Flooded?'

'He says the bank be broke.'

'The Lark embankment?'

Drownlands realised instantly the significance of the announcement.

'Quick!' said he; 'light me the lantern. Sharp! No time is to be lost.'

He ran to the corner to snatch up a stick, and, without observing what he did, laid hold of the flail. He did not perceive his mistake till he had reached the foot of the staircase. Then he could not delay to return and exchange it for a staff. He caught the lantern from the hand of Sarah and went out into the yard. His feet at once splashed into water.

'What has happened?' he exclaimed, with an

oath. 'It cannot be that they have cut the embankment.'

He splashed on. Over the frozen surface of the soil a ripple of water was running, followed by another ripple, and with each the film of water covering the yard was sensibly deepened.

'The bank must have broken. The frost has done it. They would never have dared to cut it.'

Swaying his lantern, Drownlands strode through the water, out of the stackyard and into the drove that led from his farm to the highway. This had been much cut up that day by his waggons carting roots. The heavy vehicles with broad wheels had crushed through the icy crust, and the hoofs of the horses had assisted in breaking up the frost case. Thus in places the water was able to act on the unfrozen peat, and undermine the surface that was hard frozen. The peat was dry, and when the water reached it, it swelled as a sponge.

A tide was flowing down the drove. On both sides were the frozen dykes; the water covered the ice, running along it, and but for the sedge and rushes that rose out of the ditches, their presence would have been undefined.

The brow of Drownlands darkened, and his cheeks glowed. Was this the meaning of the threats launched against him? He had never conceived it possible that the men would have recourse to such means as this to pay off their grudge against him, for to inundate the farm was to destroy their field of labour.

'I wish I had brought my gun,' said he. 'And then, should I see one of the scoundrels, I'd shoot him with no more scruple than I would a dotterel. As it is, let me come upon one,'—he raised and flourished his flail,—'and I will beat out his brains.'

Drownlands walked with difficulty. Where the surface under the water was frozen, there it was slippery. Where it was broken through

and broken up by the wain wheels and horse hoofs, there it was slough.

Ruts, still frozen, were in places two or three feet in depth, and they were filled. Invisible under the water, he was liable to sink into them. He stumbled along, angry, swearing, advancing with labour, forced to hold his lantern, first to one side, then to the other, to make sure that he was not turning from his road, his sole guide being the sedge lines, one on each side.

The roads in the Fens are not made of stone, for stone is not to be found in the Fens. The soil hardens with drought and frost. In rainy weather it is a slough. The draining-machines, being almost constantly at work, suck all the moisture out of the soil, and as it dries it shrinks. Now that the water from the canal was overflowing the fen, it rippled on innocuously over the icy case, but wherever it could penetrate through that case, at every crack, at every dint, it was drunk in in heavy draughts by the thirsty

soil, that immediately heaved and swelled as it imbibed the moisture, and in so doing dissolved into slough.

The tide continued to flow. In the yard the water had been hardly as high as the instep. It now flowed over the boot tops.

The water was intensely cold.

Drownlands had on his boots, such as he wore ordinarily, but not his wading boots that reached to the thighs. He had not thought it necessary to wear such protectors in frosty weather. Those he wore did not extend higher than his calves. Already, in one of his plunges into a rut filled with water, he had soaked his feet, his boots, so far from serving as a protection, being an encumbrance. The flail, moreover, was of small service; the handfast was not of length sufficient for him to probe the water before him and sound his way. Would that he had drawn on his wading-boots—would that he had brought a leaping-pole!

Drownlands turned his head over his shoulder and looked back at the house. He could see the light from the kitchen and that from his office —the latter partially, as, owing to the broken glass in the window, he had closed the shutters. He had left his lamp burning, and he could distinguish its light in a line where the shutters closed imperfectly.

It seemed to the man that the distance he had come was greater than it really was.

The difficulty of advancing must increase with every few minutes. In a quarter of an hour it would not be possible to traverse the distance between Prickwillow and the embankment save by boat.

He must reach the tow-path, and hasten along it to the nearest station, where a gang of workmen was quartered, with implements and material ready on an emergency.

There was no time to be lost. Every minute was of importance. Drownlands knew but too

well that if his farm were inundated, it would be rendered valueless for several years. It would not be utter ruin, as he had the savings of the past to eat into, but it would prevent his reaping advantage from his land till it had been completely recovered of the effects of the flood.

Struggling with the rising tide, he succeeded in getting upon the highway. But now his difficulties were the greater, for he had entered into the current that poured from the Lark. The water rushed over his knees. The cold was almost insupportable. With body bent, step by step, helping himself onwards with the flail, but unable always to trust it, owing to the pits in the submerged surface, he advanced slowly.

He held up the lantern and looked round. The tallow candle through the horn sides but feebly illumined the night. It showed the gurgling water in which he was wading, but it showed nothing beside. He did not any longer know his direction. He must stem the current,

but was unable to judge where the edge and where the centre of the current were that poured against him.

When he lowered his lantern, he was aware of a lurid light in the sky above the embankment, and saw now and then a brilliant spark thrown up. That there was a fire somewhere he could not doubt, and concluded that the rioters who had cut the embankment were continuing their incendiary work as before. He could not see the wheel of fire; he was too low down for that, but he saw the illumination caused by it. Suddenly his feet gave way, and he fell in the water. He had gone into one of the deepest cart-ruts. As he fell, his lantern was extinguished.

It was now impossible for him to return. He could not, if he wished it, have retraced his steps. His only possible course was to scramble up the bank, and to do this he now devoted all his energies. But unhappily he had reached precisely that point where the bank had been

cut through, and was therefore exposed to the full force of the outrush of the river. As, by a desperate effort, he recovered his feet, he could see the lip of water curling over, reddened by the reflection of the fire beyond. He was drenched in the ice-cold water, but that was nothing to the anguish in his feet; they were turning dead, numbed by the water in which they had been immersed so long without proper protection.

But this was not all. No sooner had Drownlands reached the slope of the embankment than he became aware that the little assistance rendered him by the frost was at an end. The rush of water had broken up the gault of which the bank was formed, was eating at every moment farther into it, and widening the mouth by which it poured from the bed of the river upon the low reclaimed land. The moistened marl was greasy under his feet. When he slipped and endeavoured to catch at the bank,

his hands sank into the sodden clay, and the tenacious matter held his fingers like glue. His feet, moreover, went deep into the clay, and to extract them was difficult.

It became apparent to Drownlands that he must battle for his life against the current.

He endeavoured to assist himself in his ascent by the staff of the flail, but this proved of no help to him, as it sank with the pressure applied to it in the glutinous mass. He strove to heave himself up, and could not; his feet, dead with cold, and, through their loss of sensation, no longer able to feel the bottom, slipped from under him. He could not extract his staff from the marl. All he was able to do was to cling to it, and pant and recover breath, and then make another desperate effort forward.

The water, tearing through the fissure in the bank, broke off masses of the clay, half frozen, and whirled them down, and along with them blocks of river ice that had broken up. It was

sometimes difficult to ascend the embankment, the slope of which was steep, in the face of a strong wind ; it was a hundred times more difficult now, when it had to be done against a rushing torrent, and that of water which curdled the blood in the veins, knotted the muscles with cramp, and paralysed the sinews.

No thought of revenge on those who had cut the bank now occupied the mind of Drownlands —no thought of having the leak stopped. The one absorbing consideration was how to escape from the deadly-cold raging current.

Then a sharp cant of ice whirled down, cut his knuckles and jarred his fingers, so that he let go the flail with one hand, but seized it in time with the other to save himself from being swept away. He was carried off his feet, and in trying to right himself drove one foot so deeply into the marl, that, when he endeavoured to pluck it forth, the tenacious matter held his boot and tore it off his foot. The intensity of the

cold was, however, so great that he was not sensible of the loss. He looked up. The red auroral light was still illumining the sky behind the bank. He held to the flail that was planted in the clay. If that gave way, his hold on life would be gone.

Now he saw above him a dark figure on the bank, and he cried, 'Help! help!'

'Who calls there?'

'It is I—Ki Drownlands.'

The man made no effort to descend. He folded his arms, and said slowly in harsh tones—

'I cannot help you. I am Ephraim Beamish. You are prepared to testify against some twenty of my comrades, and to send them to the gallows. Which is of most worth, your life, you Judas, or theirs?'

'Help! I will say nothing.'

'I cannot trust you,' said Beamish. 'Wretched man, water was created of God to cleanse away

transgression. Go, wash thee and be clean—wash thee and be free from thy sins.'

Then a torch flared above the bank. Mark was there with Zita.

'Who is there? What is this?' Mark asked, with an agitated voice. The blazing tarred wood, sending up a golden burst of flame, illumined the upturned countenance of Drownlands. The struggling man raised his arm to wipe the water and sweat from his eyes and screen them from the brilliant light.

'It is the master,' said Zita. 'Save him, Mark! Oh, do save him!'

Instantly, but with caution, Mark descended, digging his heels deep into the marl at each step, and held the torch aloft, wavering, guttering, throwing out sparks in the wind. 'Give me your hand,' said the young man.

The exhausted, desperate Drownlands withdrew his arm from before his eyes.

In the burning wood was a copper nail, and

this now sent forth a lambent, grass-green flame, in the light of which Drownlands' face was like that of a corpse. The man, in his extreme peril and desire for help, stretched forth his hand.

Then the wind blew the flame so that the face of Mark was illumined. Suddenly Tiger Ki snatched his hand back again.

'A Runham—no!'

He endeavoured by a frantic effort to ascend the bank by his own efforts. There ensued a terrible scene—the struggle of a well-nigh spent man with the adverse elements to deliver himself from his position. He fought with the water and the clay, tossing a spray about him, pounding with his feet, one shod, the other bare, churning clay and water around him.

Failing to mount one step above where the flail was rooted, he discontinued his profitless effort, and, clinging with both hands to the stay, cried—

'Zita, I will owe life to you, or to none!'

Without a thought for herself, the girl leaped to his aid.

In a moment his disengaged arm was round her.

'We may die—if we cannot live—together.'

'Let go!' shouted Mark, and laid hold of Zita by the arm. 'Let go!'

'To you—never!'

Without consideration Mark drove the burning torch against his hand that clasped the girl.

With a shriek Drownlands relaxed his hold.

At that moment, Ephraim, who had descended carefully, had laid hold of the flail above where Drownlands' hand had clutched it. He stooped, and, exerting his full force from above, drew it forth from the clay in which it was fast.

At once Drownlands slid away in the stream. Still clinging to the flail, he was carried off his feet, out of the range of light cast by the torch, and under water.

'Go!' said Beamish, waving his hand over the torrent. 'Go! thou accuser of thy brethren!

Go, wash away thy sins in the water that drowns thee!'

He saw the flood before him glittering like gold. He looked round. The gangers had come—summoned by Kainie.

'Save him! save him!' cried Zita.

'Where is he?—who can say? Carried forth into the outer darkness; rolled away in the baptismal flood—who can say whither?' answered Ephraim.

'No,' said one of the gangers. 'No help is possible.'

'God have mercy on a sinful soul!' said Ephraim.

CHAPTER XL

THISTLES

THE trial of the rioters came on before a Special Commission, that sat a few weeks after the arrest of the men. The cutting of the embankment after the arrest had greatly exasperated minds against the unfortunate men who were to take their trial, although they themselves were guiltless in this matter. It probably served to sharpen the sentences pronounced upon them, as their judges shared the general feeling that an example should be made that would overawe the fen-men, and deter them from future acts of lawlessness.

Judgment of death was passed on thirty-four men, but only five were actually executed.

The sentence on nine was mitigated into transportation for life, and that on the rest was commuted to imprisonment for a term of years.

Ephraim Beamish was not taken. Mark succeeded in effecting his escape from the Fens. He supplied him with money, and Beamish took ship at Liverpool for the United States, where he bought a farm, then turned backwoods Baptist preacher, tired of that, returned to farm life, and married Kainie, who went out to him. She was a rich woman, and might have had her pick of the young fen-farmers. She had inherited everything that had belonged to her uncle. But Kainie would have no one save Pip, and as Pip could not come to her, she sold Prickwillow to Mark, and went out to the man of her choice in the New World.

Mark gave his half-sister a fair price for the farm. The land had been seriously injured by the inundation, and would have been more seriously affected had not the bankers, sum-

moned by Kainie, been able rapidly and effectually to stop the breach.

Mark was now a man of substance. When he purchased Prickwillow, he united that estate to Crumbland, and became one of the largest landed proprietors in that portion of the Fens; nevertheless, like his fellow-yeomen, he did not affect to be a squire, but lived in sober fashion, worked with his men, and worked harder than any one of them. A popular man he was with the labourer as with the farmer, for he was just and kindly, and possessed unflagging good spirits. He amassed money. Let his sons or grandsons style themselves gentlemen, said he; for his part, he was content to be plain Mark Runham, farmer.

What is to be told concerning Zita?

The ill opinion formed of her had been due mainly to the malicious and slanderous tongue of Leehanna Tunkiss. Whatever had been said against Zita was traceable to this source.

When it was discovered that Ki Drownlands had made and executed his will on the very day on which he died, and that in it he had constituted his niece sole heiress of all he possessed, and had not even mentioned the Cheap Jack girl, the trust of the fen-folk in the word of Mrs. Tunkiss failed. The housekeeper was discredited and her stories disbelieved.

It was not long before Mark Runham made Zita his wife, and the van, with all its goods, was moved by a team of his horses to Crumbland.

There was one secret Zita retained locked in her heart, and which she never revealed to Mark —the events of the night when Ki Drownlands and Jake Runham met on the embankment and fought with the flails till Mark's father was cast into the canal—there to perish. There was no necessity for her to tell it. The guilty man had died as had his foe—in the same water.

For many years recourse was had to the

stores of the van whenever the household was in need of some article there in stock.

In the Fens, when a man requires to traverse a considerable distance, he provides himself with a leaping-pole, and makes for his destination in a bee-line, clearing every watery obstruction in his way.

The author now uses this privilege—takes pole in hand, and, seeing the end before him, makes for it. What does he first see after having put down the pole and leaped?

A van. Surely the familiar Cheap Jack conveyance, crawling along the drove on a summer's day, drawn by an old horse that takes a few steps, then pauses, breathes hard, looks behind him with a peculiarly resolute expression in his eye, and ignores absolutely every appeal, entreaty, objurgation addressed to him, till he has recovered his wind, when he goes on once more.

From within the van issue cheery children's voices. Then some little heads appear, some

with auburn hair and brown eyes, others very fair, and with eyes the colour of the sky.

'What the dickens is that there concern?' asks a stranger, standing on the tow-path by the Lark, who from his vantage-ground watches the slow and intermittent progress of the van on the drove.

'Lor' bless you!' answers a ganger going by. 'It's only them little Cheap Jackies taking a drive.'

Again. What is the meaning of the noise that issues from the coach-house? A shrill voice is haranguing, then is broken in on by a clamour of other voices.

Let us look within.

The van is there, in a house so boxed in as to be inaccessible to poultry.

The front of the van is down. The red velvet curtains, much faded, and the gold fringe, much tarnished, are suspended in their proper places, decorating the front. One boy is on the plat-

form, and is exhibiting his toys to his brothers and sisters, and offering them for sale at extravagant prices; then, abating his demands, he assures them that he offers these articles for absolutely the last time, and at the lowest price which he will consent to receive.

Mark Runham returns from the farm.

'Zita,' says he, 'I want to see my little ones. Where are they?'

'At their favourite amusement on a rainy day.'

'What is that?'

'Playing at being Cheap Jacks. Mark, it is in their blood.'

'Who is doing the selling to-day?'

'Our eldest — James,' answers Zita; 'and, Mark, when James marries, we'll have out that there epergne for the wedding breakfast.'

'That's a long way ahead,' answers Mark.

So it seemed to him. But again the novelist uses his privilege, puts down the pole, and away

he goes with one great bound over a period of several years, and finds himself suddenly alight in the parlour of Crumbland. He sees before him Mark, now a middle-aged man, broad in shoulders and in beam, with ruddy cheeks that are pretty full; and Zita, now a comely matron.

Facing his father and mother, with some shyness in his face, stands Jim, the hope of the family, twirling his hat, and looking furtively in his father's face, as he says—

'Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me, and let me go.'

'Go? Go, Jim? Good gracious! what do you mean? Whither do you want to go?'

'That is just it; nowhere in particular, and yet somewhere.'

'But—leave home?'

'Yes, father, I want to be off and about.'

'Why, Jim, this is sheer delirium—tremenjous, as your mother would say. There is Prick-

willow empty, waiting for you, whenever you marry.'

'And the epergne for the breakfast-table,' added Zita.

'I do not want to marry, father! The epergne must wait, mother dear! I haven't found the right one yet,' answered James, hanging his head.

'But, good gracious! why should you go? Have not I been kind to you? Have not you been allowed your own way in all that is right?'

'Never was there a better father,' answered the young man, with emotion, 'and never, never a dearer, better mother! It is not that. I love home. I love my parents and my brothers and sisters. I dote on the baby. I love the Fens. I cannot believe that any other portion of God's world can be worth living in. I am sure none will be more beautiful in my eyes than the fens of Ely. Nevertheless, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me, and let me go.'

'But for what do you want to be off?'

'Why, father, mother,' says the young man, 'I want to be a Cheap Jack. Ever since I was a child I have loved to drive bargains.'

'Let him go,' says Zita. 'There are some things we have never found a use for here. There's that box of scents; there's the garden syringe. It is a sad pity so much capital should lie idle.'

'Father,' says the young man, 'I feel as though I must go. I do not say I shall be a Cheap Jack all my days.'

'Why, I had such grand views for you, Jim; I thought I would send you to college, and I hoped some day you might even try and get into Parliament.'

'Mark,'—it is Zita who speaks,—'I was a rambling girl once, a sort of a vagabond, going over the country selling my goods; but I have become stationary, like the van, stuck in the fen peat. I have not stirred for many a year, and

have never desired to rove out of the Fens any more. It will be the same with Jim. He has it in his bones. It will do him an amazing lot of good. He'll get to know the General Public.'

'That is it, father,' says James. 'I seems as if I never could be happy and easy in my mind till I've done a stroke of business with that there Public. And I sees my way to it. There's abundance of thistles growing about the edges of the drains. I wants to cut 'em down.'

'Well, cut 'em. That need not take you away.'

'Father, I wants to make the General Public eat 'em, and pay for the privilege. I've heard in my sleep a voice in my ear that I do believe comes from the General Public, saying, "Jim! Jim! give us thistles!" And the wind always whistles to the same tune. And the thunder rolling seems to be the voice of the General Public, braying, "Give us thistles!" And, father, even the very bees when they hum

about the flowers seem to convey to me in a whisper the message, as from a lover, but it comes from the General Public, "Give us thistles. We are sick for thistledown. 'Tisn't bread we wants—'tisn't meat—'tis thistledown." I can't say exactly how I'll dispose of it to them,—whether rolled up in pills, or stuffed in feather beds,—but I know the Public will buy thistles in any disguise. And then, father, think of the profits.'

'Mark,' said Zita, 'let him go. Cheap-jacking is an edication. It teaches a chap to know the General Public, what to lay on his back, how to tickle his ears, what you can make him swallow. If you think of making Jim a mimber of Parliament, there is no school, no college more suitable than the Cheap Jack's van. Let him go, Mark. He's a good boy—he'll come to no harm. He'll settle down the better after it, and he'll enjoy himself—"tremenjous."'

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OCTOBER 1893

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